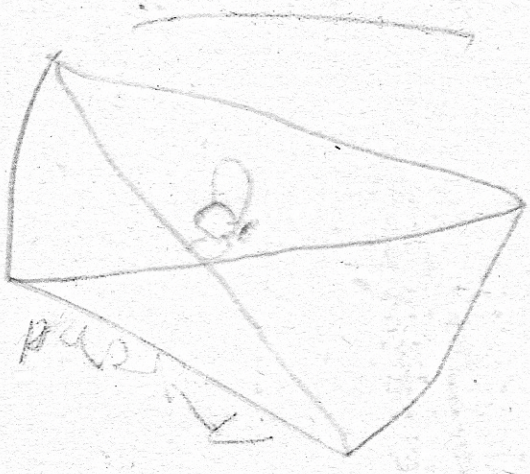
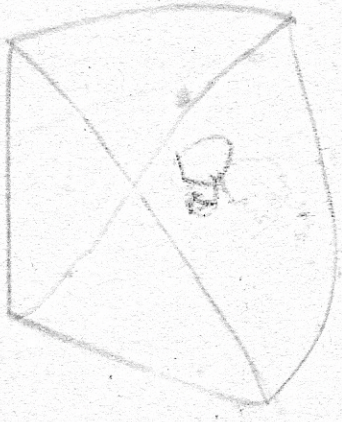
GIRLS' CRYSTAL

Annual

1944





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Frontispiece

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THEIR THRILLING FIND IN PIRATES' CAVE

GIRLS' CRYSTAL Annual

1944

ISSUED FROM
THE FLEETWAY HOUSE,
FARRINGDON STREET,
LONDON, E.C.4.

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ONLY JOYCE STOOD BY HIM

By HAZEL ARMITAGE

Everyone viewed the new boy with suspicion. Even Joyce Marshall's best friend mistrusted him. Only Joyce herself remained loyal—and she was resolved to help him in his mystery quest.

CHAPTER I

TERRY DIDN'T TRUST HIM

"OH, I'm so glad I persuaded Terry Crawford to give Jimmy Fairhead a chance to row in the Castlemoor race. The boy was just dying to get into the school eight."

Thus spoke Joyce Marshall, the pretty young owner of Willowbanks boathouse, as she stood on the landing-stage, gazing up-river. She spoke to her friend and helper, Peggy Grant, who was munching an apple.

Rather quizzically Peggy looked up at her.

"Joyce, do you think you were wise?"

"Why not?" Joyce asked.

"Well, I don't know, but they are saying things," Peggy said.

For a moment Joyce frowned. It was a fortnight now since the opening of new-term at the near-by Otterford Boys' School, and Jimmy Fairhead had been one of the Middle School's new boys. She liked Jimmy—she likes especially his devotion to rowing. She had rather made a friend of Jimmy, although she had to confess he had volunteered little information about himself.

For Jimmy's sake she had persuaded her great Otterford chum, Terence Crawford, the games captain, to include him in the eight that was being built up for the forthcoming race against the cadets of Castlemoor School.

Yet—there was something odd, something different about Jimmy Fairhead. And things certainly *were* being said—odd, disturbing things which made Jimmy a target of suspicion. Even Terry was not sure of him. Terry, in fact, had only given in to her pleadings on Jimmy's behalf

because of his unshakable friendship for her. What really *was* wrong with Jimmy Fairhead ?

" Of course, there's nothing wrong with Jimmy," she said. " I know Terry's a bit queer about him, but even Terry can't say anything to his discredit. Anyway, I'm jolly glad he's got his place in the eight. That boy simply adores rowing, and he will be champion of Middle School before the term's out. Hello ! " she added, suddenly peering forward. " Who's this ? "

Quickly she jerked her head as she heard a sound of movement in the near-by reeds. It was to see a boy furtively making his way towards the boathouse, stopping every few moments to look round, as if fearful lest he might be followed.

" Why, it's an Otterford fellow ! " Peggy cried, as she also saw that stealthy figure.

An Otterford fellow it was. His scarlet cap proclaimed that and, suddenly, as he drew nearer, his identity became plain.

" It's Fairhead — Jimmy Fairhead ! " Joyce exclaimed in astonishment. " And he's beckoning to me ! " Wonderingly, she darted across to where the new boy now crouched. " Why, whatever's the matter, Jimmy ? " she asked.

The boy went a little red.

" N-nothing ! " he stammered. " I only don't want to be seen. I say, Miss Joyce, can—can I have a boat ? "

" Why, of course, Jimmy. But I wish you'd tell me what's the matter ? "

" I'd—I'd rather not," he said. " It's nothing much. It's only that——" He broke off and shook his head. " No, Miss Joyce, I'm not going to worry you with my troubles. Can I have the boat that's moored just by the reeds ? "

" Take it ! " Joyce invited. " But, Jimmy——" she caught his sleeve as he stepped into the boat. " If you're in trouble——"

" Oh, it—it's all right," Fairhead mumbled. " No, Miss Joyce, I can manage this on my own. You've done enough already, goodness only knows, getting me into the eight and all that. But——" he paused. " If—if anybody should come along and ask about me, try, if you can, not to let on you've seen me."

" I will," Joyce promised, and watched him as he rowed round the bend towards Riverfalls Island where the Castlemoor School cadets were encamped. " Now, I wonder," she mused, feeling a sudden unaccountable anxiety, " what's gone wrong ? Where——"

" Joyce ! Joyce, here's Terry ! " Peggy suddenly cried.

Again Joyce wheeled, her face dimpling into a welcoming smile at sight of the boy in the skiff who was rowing up from Otterford. She raised a welcoming hand.

" Cheerio, Terry ! "

Terence Crawford saw her. His own face eagerly lit up. In half a dozen strong strokes he had scraped alongside the landing-stage. Swiftly mooring up, he clambered out.

" 'Lo, Joyce, jolly glad to see you ! " he said. " And you, Pegs ! By the way——" he looked round keenly. " You haven't seen Fairhead, have you ? "

" Fairhead ? " Joyce echoed and looked surprised. " Why ? "

" I want him."

" But—but there's nothing wrong, surely ? "

" Plenty," Terry said briefly.

" Oh ! " Joyce exclaimed.

" That chap—I can't make him out." Terry shook his head. " Somebody is causing trouble in the Castlemoor camp, and the chaps there say it is one of our fellows. Last night the police ticked them off because somebody had left a light blazing, but the Castlemoor chaps swear that the light was put out, and one of our fellows was seen creeping about the place after dark. This morning, before breakfast, one of the Castlemoor fellows found an Otterford chap ransacking through his kitbag. The Otterford chappie got away, however, without being recognised."

Joyce bit her lip.

" And you think that was Fairhead ? "

" Well, yes," Terry said. " Last night I caught Fairhead breaking bounds. This morning he wasn't in at brekker. It's pretty general knowledge that Fairhead is always hanging around the camp without, for some reason, daring to show his face

there. Anyway," he added grimly, " I'm seeing he does no more mischief and that's why I'm on his track now. You haven't seen him ? "

" Terry, I—I'm sure Jimmy couldn't be doing anything rotten," Joyce protested.

" You like the chap, don't you ? " Terry shrugged. " Be careful, Joyce. Don't let your feelings run away with you. There's something fishy about Fairhead, even though he doesn't seem a bad sort on the surface. Anyway, if he is causing trouble in the Castlemoor camp, I tell you, frankly, Joyce, that he goes out of the eight. I'm off to check up."

" But Terry—— "

Terry, however, with a wave of his hand, had jumped back into his boat. The next moment he was pulling back into mid-stream.

"Joyce," Peggy said uneasily.

But Joyce wasn't listening to her chum then. Her thoughts were with Jimmy Fairhead. Had her new chum really been responsible for those misdeeds Terry had outlined ? Was he really playing some deep inscrutable game in the Castlemoor camp ? Terry was not usually mistaken in these matters—and Terry, obviously, was suspicious. But no! She trusted her own judgment where Jimmy was concerned. Jimmy was true blue ! If Jimmy had business in the Castlemoor camp, it was not shady business. All the same, he *had* rowed off towards the Castlemoor camp. And if Terry caught him——

" Peggy, look after things ! " she said impulsively.

" But, Joyce, where—— "

Joyce, however, was swiftly running. She did not like that last threat of Terry's. It would be a bitter blow to Jimmy Fairhead if he were dropped from the eight. She must warn him !

Getting out her bicycle, she went flying up the towpath, screened from the river by the willows which grew so profusely along the water's edge. In a few minutes Riverfalls Island, dotted with tents, came into view.

Across the bottleneck of the river the Castlemoor visitors had thrown a small footbridge which connected the island with the mainland. Joyce's heart leapt as she saw, moored to the island side of the bridge, the boat which she had lent to Jimmy.

" So—so he is on the island," she breathed.

Dismounting, she propped her cycle against the support of the bridge. Swiftly she ran over it. But hardly had she reached the centre of the bridge when, from the camp came angry shouts.

" It's that Otterford rotter again ! "

" He's knocked our stew into the fire."

" After him ! "

Crashing footsteps sounded and Joyce's heart drummed as she reached the island. Then, suddenly, the bushes parted. A face, white and strained peered startledly into hers. Joyce jumped.

" Jimmy ! "

" Miss Joyce—you. I —I didn't do it," Fairhead muttered. " That

" I'm off to check up ! " Terry said, and before Joyce could detain him he had picked up the oars and rowed away. He had gone in search of the mystery new boy !

rotter—oh help!" he groaned, as the pursuit drew near. "I'm caught!"

"No, you're not," Joyce corrected. "Jimmy—quickly—to the other side of the bridge. Grab my bike—and no, silly, no arguments, please!" She gave him an urgent push. "Hurry! Nobody's seen you yet!"

"Oh, Miss Joyce, what a sport you are!" Fairhead breathed.

But Joyce, rapidly unmooring his boat, had jumped into it, breathing a sigh of relief as she saw the fugitive gain the other side of the bridge, mount her bike, and race off beyond the willows.

And she smiled as the bushes again parted, as a crowd of blue-capped Castlemoor boys arrived; as one—a tall, thin-faced fellow whom Joyce knew as Sidney Mayers—bawled out to her:

"Hi, Joyce, what have you done with that beastly Otterford cad?"

Joyce did not like Sidney Mayers. She eyed him coldly.

"I haven't seen any Otterford cad," she replied.

"He came this way."

"No cad has come my way," Joyce retorted.

"Bosh! You must have seen him!"

"Then I'm blind?" she suggested. "Talk sense, for goodness' sake! If he's come this way he'd have been bound to have a boat to get away in, wouldn't he?"

"Well, that's right," another boy said, looking puzzled. "Then how could he have escaped? Hello, though, here's Crawford"—this as Terry, strenuously rowing, hove into view. "I say, Crawford——"

With a swift, puzzled glance at Joyce, Terry rowed up and jumped ashore. His face darkened as the Castlemoor boys gathered round him and Mayers gave him the story of the latest outrage.

"So!" he said.

"Yes, so," scoffed Mayers. "And I might tell you, Crawford, that if you let that chap run wild any longer there's going to be a dust-up. We don't take kindly to his brand of trickery."

"Don't worry," Terry returned curtly. "I'll get him. Sorry, chaps!"

His face was grim and angry as he returned to his boat. Rather bitter, too. Again he glanced at Joyce as he picked up his oars.

"Row a little way with me, will you?" he asked quietly.

"Pleasure," Joyce responded cheerfully. "Shall we make a race of it?"

"Thanks, no," Terry said dryly. "Just make for the backwater there. Joyce, I rather want to talk to you."

Joyce bit her lip. She scented trouble. But thank goodness Jimmy had got away!

Alongside Terry's boat in the backwater the games captain of Otterford looked at her.

"Joyce, why did you help Fairhead to get away?"

"I?" Joyce asked in feigned surprise.

"Yes—you!" Again Terry looked at her, and beneath his keen, searching eyes Joyce's own eyes fell confusedly. "You didn't come here in that boat, did you? If you had, you'd have had to pass me on the river. That was the boat Fairhead came in.

Joyce was silent.

"Joyce, why did you help him?"

"Well, supposing I did?" Joyce retorted a little defiantly. "Oh, Terry, give the boy a chance. I'm sure he didn't upset that stew-pot. I—Terry," she faltered as he fiercely gripped his oars, "don't—don't ask me any more about him, please!"

Exasperatedly he regarded her.

"You're still convinced that he's all he pretends to be?"

"Terry, yes."

"Then I hope," Terry said between his teeth, "that you won't regret it. I'm sorry, Joyce, that for once we can't agree. Anyway," he added grimly, "you can tell the rotter that he's in a first class position for getting sacked from the eight. 'Bye," he added briefly, and without another glance he rowed away.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW BOY'S SECRET

"JOYCE, you—you don't think there *is* anything in what they're all saying?"

It was next morning. At breakfast in

"I say," cried Joyce, "by the look of it Peggy's made a big catch! Why don't you join her?" She waited anxiously. Would her ruse to lure Terry away from his present position succeed?

the boathouse at Willowbanks, Peggy blurted out that question rather falteringly.

"No!" Joyce said fiercely.

"But—but why does Jimmy Fairhead keep on snooping about the camp then?"

Joyce shook her head. She was as worried as Peggy over that question. Her instinctive faith still caused her to cling to Jimmy Fairhead, but the knowledge that her friendship for the new boy was creating constraint between herself and Terry filled her with uneasiness. And she was also alarmed by the new stories which were drifting around concerning the misdeeds of the new boy.

Last night the guy ropes of two of the Castlemoor tents had been cut through. Again Fairhead had been caught out of bounds. Something like an ultimatum from the camp had reached Otterford, declaring that if the unknown raider did not cease his mischief-making the boat race might be called off. Suspicion against the new boy at his own school was openly rife, though Jimmy fiercely declared his innocence of any of the crimes imputed to him.

"Jimmy's in trouble—big trouble," Joyce said, "and he's too proud to say what it is. But"—she bit her lip—"he is a chump. At this rate he'll certainly get himself dropped from the eight, even if he doesn't bring about a break between the two schools. Pegs, I'm going along to Otterford."

Peggy blinked in surprise.

"But why?"

"I'm going to see Jimmy. I'm going to ask him frankly what the trouble is. We've still got that empty picnic hamper the Head's wife left here the other day. I'll take that back as an excuse."

"Oh, Joyce, be careful!" Peggy muttered apprehensively.

But Joyce only laughed. Having made up her mind to a course of action, she was happy. Humming a tune, she fished out the picnic basket, stepped into a boat and rowed out into mid-stream. As she did so, she became aware of a Castlemoor boy on the opposite bank of the river. His hands thrust into his pockets, he was watching her grinningly.

It was the thin-faced Sidney Mayers.

"Hello, want to hire a boat?" she asked

" Thanks, but we don't hire boats from schoolgirls ! " Mayers said disdainfully. " Mind you don't lose that oar ! "

" Smart, aren't you? " Joyce retorted as, rowing close in, she dropped the blade of the oar flat on the water and splashed Mayers from ankle to knee. " Sorry ! " she gurgled. " That's the worst of us amateur girl rowers ! Bye, bye ! "

" Here——" spluttered Mayers.

But Joyce, with a merry laugh, was rowing away—with an ease and speed which completely discounted her claim to inexperience. A few minutes later the towers of the famous boys' school came into view. Alongside the school's jetty, she moored her boat.

It was a whole holiday, and Joyce saw that cricket nets, tennis courts and swimming pool were crowded. All the boys seemed to be enjoying themselves—all but one lad.

He sat alone under one of the shady larches that bordered the drive. There was a book on his knee, but he was not reading it. There was an expression on his face which blended ill with the carefree atmosphere which surrounded him. A pang of pity struck at Joyce's heart.

" Jimmy ! " she softly exclaimed, as she walked up the drive.

He started, looked up, coloured.

" M-Miss Joyce ! "

Quietly Joyce took a seat beside him.

" I came to see you, Jimmy," she said, placing the picnic basket on the ground. " Jimmy, what's all this I'm hearing about you ? "

He looked away.

" Oh, Miss Joyce, don't take any notice," he said. " And—and please don't mix yourself up in it."

" But," Joyce gently expostulated, " I can't help but take notice. And—well, even you must admit it, Jimmy—after yesterday, I am rather mixed up in it. But don't worry ; I'm not believing what the others are saying. At the same time, Jimmy, I do feel entitled to some explanation. Why do you keep on going to the camp ? You must know you're upsetting Terry."

" I know." Regretfully the boy bowed his head. " But—but I'm doing nothing wrong there, Miss Joyce. In—in spite of what they're saying. You see——" he paused ; then, abruptly, he turned to her. " Miss Joyce, will you keep a secret ? "

" Silly ; of course ! "

" Then—then I'll tell you, Miss Joyce. Last term I was at school at Castlemoor."

Joyce's eyes opened.

" And—and near the end of the term, something happened. The Head's silver watch was stolen. Miss Joyce, believe me, please, but I had nothing to do with that theft, though it was all traced to me." His eyes burned for a moment. " I—I should have been expelled if it hadn't been so near end of term. As it was, I escaped that, and so was able to get into Otterford——"

Joyce's eyes misted.

" Poor Jimmy ! " she murmured sympathetically.

" That's why I'm going to the camp now," he added somewhat unexpectedly. " There's a certain thing there—a brass model of an elephant—that I must get hold of before the boat-race, Miss Joyce. It's that which will prove my innocence and—and oh, Miss Joyce, you can't guess what it will mean to me ! How can I possibly row against my old school, knowing that they look on me as a sort of criminal ? "

Joyce, understanding, was deeply touched.

" Jimmy, why didn't you tell me before ? "

" Because I didn't want to bother you, Joyce. After all——"

" And how will the brass elephant prove your innocence ? "

" It's not the elephant. It's what's hidden inside it. That rotter Mayers has it. I found that out yesterday. That—that's why I've been going to the camp."

" And it's still in the camp ? " Joyce asked quickly. " Where ? "

" Under the floorboards in Mayer's tent." The boy looked round. " Miss Joyce, I'm going to get it this afternoon."

" Jimmy ! "

" Yes." He seemed relieved to be able to unburden his mind now—perhaps to clarify in speech the plan already mentally

formed. " Mayers' tent is near the edge of Willow Cove. It should be easy enough to get at. The cadets are doing a route march this afternoon, and so the camp should be deserted. Miss Joyce—you can help, in one way. Will you lend me your bicycle again, please ? "

" Why, of course. But——" she remembered something suddenly. " But, Jimmy, you can't go this afternoon."

" Miss Joyce, I must. It's my only chance before the race ! "

" All the same, you can't," Joyce insisted. " Because—oh, Jimmy, I've just remembered something. Last Saturday Terry booked a punt for this afternoon. That means that Terry is going fishing, and Terry always fishes from Willow Cove."

For a moment the boy looked dismayed.

" All the same, I'll just have to risk it," he said quietly. " I'm not likely to get another opportunity. If I get there soon I may be able to hide until the coast is clear and grab the elephant before Crawford arrives. I——" and then in quick confusion he rose to his feet. " Here comes Crawford," he said. " Miss Joyce, excuse me ."

" But, Jimmy——"

Fairhead, however, was already walking rapidly away. Terry, coming up, raised his cap just a little awkwardly, then frowned.

" Hello, Joyce, what brings you here ? "

" Just that," Joyce smiled, and pointed to the picnic basket. " I thought Mrs. Hargreaves might be wanting it."

" Oh ? " Terry did not look entirely convinced. " And meeting Fairhead was just an accident ? "

Joyce laughed.

" Well, there's nothing very astonishing in that, is there ? " she cried. " After all, Terry, he does live here. No more of an accident, really, than meeting you, is it ? "

Terry flushed.

" What was he saying ? "

" Oh, nothing."

He stared at her.

" Joyce, I'm not going to quiz—you know that's not in my line. But—oh, dash it, I don't want to keep warning you, but take my tip. Have done with that rotter. He's just out to make mischief."

Joyce smiled. But her heart was throbbing a little more anxiously when at last she left Terry and went to see Mrs. Hargreaves. As usual, that garrulous lady invited her to morning coffee and a chat, and on her way back across the quad Joyce ran into Alec Bryant and Co., who insisted upon an immediate tuckshop treat. As a result it was almost one o'clock when Joyce reached Willowbanks again.

Peggy, on the landing-stage, was waiting to meet her.

" Peggy," Joyce asked anxiously, " has Jimmy been here ? "

" Why, yes. He borrowed your bike a quarter of an hour ago," Peggy said.

" And nobody else has been ? "

" Only the grocer and the fishmonger. But why ? "

But Joyce was thinking then—thinking with alarm. Jimmy had gone, Jimmy would already be in hiding near Willow Cove, waiting until the cadets had departed. In a few minutes Terry, also bound for Willow Cove, would be along——

What could she do ? She must keep an eye on Jimmy !

Suddenly she had an idea.

" Peggy, a minute," she said, and there and then she explained the idea, at which Peggy first goggled and then grinned. " You'll do it, Pegs ? "

" Rather," Peggy gurgled.

" Righto, then scoot ! "

And while Peggy made ready a skiff, Joyce looked over Terry's punt. In a few minutes Peggy was pulling away up river and Joyce, putting the finishing touches to the punt, was presently surprised by Terry himself, carrying his angling gear in a canvas case. She dimpled up at him.

" All ready, sir," she announced with mock courtesy. " Hope you'll make a whale of a catch. But it is said," she added thoughtfully, " that there's no more fish in Willow Cove since the Castlemoor boys have been there."

" That's rot," he said. " I caught three beautiful perch there the day before yesterday. Anyway, it'll be quiet enough this afternoon. The chaps have gone off on a route march."

" But why not try the other side of the

river ? " Joyce suggested. " I'm sure you'd do ever so much better there."

He stared at her.

" Joyce, stick to boating and leave things you don't understand alone," he advised. " You'd be lucky to get a stickleback on the East side of the river." He stepped into the punt. Then, as Joyce stepped into her boat, he said in surprise :

" I say, you're not coming, too ? "

" Oh, just going along to Rushnest," Joyce casually informed him. " I'll keep you company as far as Willow Cove."

For once Terry did not look pleased, for Terry preferred his own company on the serious business of fishing. Apparently unconscious of that fact, Joyce rowed off beside him as he punted along, chattering animatedly the while. Presently Riverfalls Island came into view and voices there proved that it was not yet entirely uninhabited.

Looking swiftly towards Sidney Mayers' tent, Joyce's heart knew a swift contraction as she espied a shadowy figure half concealed among the branches of a willow that overhung the river. Jimmy Fairhead!

" Terry, must you try Willow Cove ? " she asked.

" Definitely," Terry replied uncompromisingly, and poling his punt into it, moored up under a tree near where Fairhead was hiding.

Joyce paddled on, mild panic gripping her now. Jimmy obviously had not yet achieved his purpose, but if his situation had been dangerous before it was doubly so now. One sound in that tree would be bound to attract Terry's attention. She must get rid of Terry!

She rowed back, making a warning grimace at Jimmy as she saw him peering through the branches. Terry, seated with rod and line, frowned as she reappeared to view.

" I say, Joyce, don't disturb the water."

" Oh, did I ? " Joyce asked with disarming charm. " So sorry. I've just remembered something—— " And she smiled at him, rowed on for twenty yards, then rowed back. Once again Terry glared as her boat churned the placid surface of his fishing ground.

" Joyce, dash it, you're ruining my sport—— "

" I'm sorry," Joyce said again. " Terry, please, lend me a hanky—— "

He tossed her one.

" Caught anything ? " Joyce enquired with polite interest.

" Of course not. How the dickens——'

" I thought you wouldn't," Joyce said placidly. " You never will be guided by real wisdom, will you, Terry ? Why not go farther along ? "

" Because I don't want to ! "

" No ? " Joyce asked. " I wonder. Wait a minute ! Peggy is fishing somewhere about here ; perhaps she's having some luck." And then, while Terry winced, she cupped her hands to lips and sent off a " coo-ee " calculated to scare fish for yards around. " Peg-gy ! "

" Joyce——" fumed Terry.

" Coo-ee ! " came a cheerful voice from the next cove and on a small headland Peggy bobbed up, three shining fish dangling from her hand.

" I say," cried Joyce. " By the look of it Peggy's made a big catch. Why don't you join her ? "

" Just wallowing in fish," Peggy chuckled. " And ever such big fat things, too. Come and try your luck, Terry."

Terry, at last, looked impressed. Joyce smiled.

" Well, what did I tell you, stick-in-the-mud ? Go and try your luck."

" Well, thanks—I will," Terry said.

And reeling in the line, he eagerly slipped into his punt and poled off up-river. At once Joyce looked up into the tree.

" Jimmy, it's O.K."

" Oh, Miss Joyce, you brick——"

" Buck up now and get it over," Joyce breathed. " The coast is clear, I think." Anxiously she looked up and down the river as he began a cautious descent. " I'll just go and keep Terry busy," she said.

With that she rowed off, to find Terry already seated near Peggy, busily unwinding his line. Peggy winked as she clambered ashore.

" The fisherman's dream pond," she grinned. " I've almost got a basketful,

"Peggy—throw it!" cried Joyce, and as her chum obeyed, she flung up a desperate hand in readiness to catch the vital brass elephant.

and the last one must have weighed over a pound. I—did you speak, Terry ? "

Terry had not spoken, but Terry had made a sort of strangled gurgle in his throat. For, in the act of casting his line, Terry's gaze had alighted upon Peggy's open angling basket, and Terry's face had suddenly turned a humiliated scarlet.

" Mackerel ! " he stuttered.

Peggy blinked.

" Mackerel ! Sea fish ! "

" Oh crumbs ! " Peggy stuttered. " Are they really ? You don't mean to say——"

But the fat was in the fire then. Terry, his face suddenly understanding, switched to Joyce.

" Your wheeze, I presume ? "

" Just—just a joke," Joyce said feebly. " But, of course, Pegs would spoil it by leaving the basket open. No harm, Terry."

" No ? " Terry's eyes were gleaming suddenly. " And what, pray, is the idea ? My hat, I think I begin to see now. No wonder you tricked me off my own ground. You wanted to get rid of me. Joyce, you're not helping that rotter Fairhead again ? "

" Oh, Terry ! "

" Is he here ? "

" How should I know ? " Joyce countered. " How——" and then she froze as a sudden cry came from the camp ; as footsteps could be heard pounding in her direction. And at once Terry had thrown down his rod ; with a bound had leapt into the bushes. The next moment :

" Fairhead, you cad ! "

" Crawford——"

" Hold him," came the voice of Mayers. " I found that worm crawling into my tent. That's the rotter who's been causing all the fuss. That——" And then, as Joyce palpitantly scrambled out of her boat, there was a scuffle, a shout. When, alarmed, she arrived on the scene, there was Jimmy in the grim grip of Terry and Sidney Mayers. And rushing towards them was one of the Castlemoor cadet masters.

" I tell you," Jimmy panted, " I did nothing—nothing——"

" No ? " sneered Mayers. " And you did nothing yesterday or the night before last. I saw you, you cad."

" Then why," Jimmy blazed, " didn't you grab me then ? Oh yes, you saw me—I believe that now. And having seen me, you got up to all those tricks to get me blamed for them and build up bad blood between your camp and Otterford. Oh, yes, I see it all now. I suppose, Mayers, you want to get me expelled from Otterford as you nearly got me expelled from Castlemoor ? "

" What ? " gasped Terry.

" That's true." It was the master who spoke. He glanced with scorn at Fairhead. " If it hadn't been so near the end of the term he would have been expelled. Crawford, I understand that you are games captain at your school."

" Yes, sir."

" Then I trust you will know what to do with this boy ? "

" The Head will know that, sir," Terry grimly replied. " But as far as I'm concerned I'll promise you one thing. You shan't be worried again. And that means, Fairhead, that you've lost your place in the eight."

" Terry, have a heart," Joyce cried, as the games captain dragged his prisoner to the water's edge. " Terry, listen to me——"

But this time Terry did not even look at her. Deliberately averting his face, he pushed past Joyce as if she did not exist.

CHAPTER III

JOYCE ISSUES A CHALLENGE

" OH, Miss Joyce, I'm fearfully sorry. I—I'd rather have been expelled than cause a bust-up between you and Crawford."

It was an hour later and the scene was the Willowbanks boathouse once more. Fairhead, hauled back to school by Terry, was out on temporary parole, the reason being that Doctor Hargreaves was out and was not expected to return before nightfall.

" But how were you caught ? " Peggy asked.

The boy shrugged.

" I don't know. But Mayers is as crafty as they make 'em. It would be just like him to have spotted me up that tree and then, of course, he would bide his time. Anyway, there it is," he added hopelessly.

" I've done my best and now that I've lost my place in the boat what does it matter? If—if only I could have got hold of that brass elephant——"

Joyce shook her head.

" Jimmy, what is in the brass elephant?"

" A pawn-ticket," came the startling reply. " A pawn-ticket for the Head's watch."

" Jimmy, how do you know? "

" Oh, I know all right." Bitterly the boy smiled. " I found out that Mayers pawned the watch after he'd pinched it. I found out, too, that Mayers keeps the ticket in the brass elephant—it's got a sort of secret cavity in it and naturally he thinks it's safe there, not knowing that I also know the secret of the cavity. That's why I went to the island—to get hold of the ticket—and that's how I found out Mayers was hiding it under the floorboards of his tent. But now——" he shrugged.

" Oh, it's a shame," Peggy burst out.

A shame it was. Fervently Joyce echoed that sentiment as she thought of how Jimmy had been misjudged. Though her own heart was heavy because of the rift with Terry. Still——

" Wait a minute," she said suddenly. " Pegs, we're taking a hand in this. The Castlemoor fellows are not back yet. supposing we go and get the elephant——"

Fairhead started.

" Miss Joyce, no. I can't let——"

" Jimmy, pipe down," Joyce said severely. " Why not? After all, we've got nothing to lose. Even if we don't succeed, the position's no worse. If we do, well, then you're cleared and Terry will be the first to make amends. We're tackling this, Jimmy."

" Miss Joyce, no! You mustn't——"

" Peggy, get the boat ready," Joyce said quietly, and Peggy, with alacrity, jumped to obey.

In vain Jimmy argued, even pleaded. Joyce's mind was made up, then.

There came a hail from Peggy. Dodging the boy, Joyce sprang into the boat. Peggy seized the oars, Joyce the rudder ropes, and the next moment they were out into midstream. Swiftly Peggy's strokes took the boat up-river, and Joyce's heart thudded as once again Riverfalls Island came into view. The next moment, however, it dropped like a stone.

For in Willow Cove a boy was seated in a boat—a boy with a mocking look upon his face, who was eyeing their approach with sneering disdain. It was Sidney Mayers.

" Oh, corks," Peggy said, as she saw him. " Joyce——"

" All right, go on," Joyce said quickly. " No, half a jiffy," she added next moment. " I've got an idea. Pegs, be on your toes. If I can only kid him to a race up-river you nip into the tent and grab the elephant."

Mayers grinned as they approached.

" Pretty hard work," he sneered. " Call that rowing? "

" Could you do better? " Joyce threw back.

" Well, I'm dashed if I could do worse. Whoever told girls they could row a boat? "

" Conceited, aren't we? " Joyce sniffed. " Whoever made you the world's champion oarsman I'd like to know. Give me a chance and I'd bet I'd row you off the river."

Mayers flushed.

" You mean it? "

" If you're man enough to take it as a challenge."

Mayers' eyes glinted at that. At once he was alert. Joyce could have sung with joy as she saw the scornful purpose in his attitude.

" Righto, then; if that's the talk let's get down to it," he snapped.

" I'm the girl," Joyce retorted. " Pegs, just get out, will you? Start us when we're ready."

Peggy, smothering a grin, got out. Joyce, trying to hide the elation she felt, rowed into midstream. After her skimmed Mayers. Lining up, they both nodded at Peggy.

" Go! " Peggy shouted.

Joyce dipped her oars, deliberately going all out for those first few yards. She shot away. Mayers, furious that she should steal even the first yard, shot after her, passed her, and went on like a steamboat, his every effort concentrated upon overwhelming Joyce in humiliating defeat.

village Christmas concert which was to take place in this very hall. Very generously Kay's father, Squire Williams, had lent them the hall, having given up living in the Grange himself for the duration of the war.

Ralph Douglas, the youthful stage-manager, laughed.

" But that's only an old yarn," he scoffed. " Don't be such a frightened ninny, Kay. Anyway, let's get on."

" Yes, rather," Mavis said. " We haven't anyone to play the ghost yet—but just imagine you see one. Where's the hero—Dick ? Dick Farrell ! " she called, impatiently looking round. " Oh golly, where has Dick gone to ? "

But of fun-loving Dick, the dashing young hero of the play, there was no sign.

" Well, blow him," Elaine grumbled. " Anyway, Dick doesn't come on until the next scene. Go on, Kay ; you start."

" And no script, please," warned Mavis. " Remember, you're all supposed to be word-perfect now. Righto, let's get going. This is just before the ghost enters. Fire ahead, Kay."

Kay positioned herself, facing the wall. The chums clustered round her in the various postures in which they had been rehearsed. Then, addressing herself to empty air, Kay began :

" Listen ; what's that ? Surely I heard a sound," she said.

" Bah, 'tis only the wind," Dale Frensham retorted—Dale was supposed to be little Kay's father. " What ails thee, child ? "

" But hark, there it is again ! "

They all stood, listening to the imaginary sound as Mavis had instructed them. And then suddenly they jumped. For without warning and most decidedly unrehearsed, there came a long, sighing moan from somewhere in the hall.

" Oh, g-goodness, w-what is it ? " Kay stuttered.

They all stood, staring and startled. That sighing moan had no part in the programme. Before anybody could venture a reply, however, a scream rent the air.

Kay turned quite white. For a moment even Mavis felt scared. Then suddenly came a metallic rattle.

" Oh ! " Kay cried. " Oh——"

" Look here, who's playing tricks ? " Mavis cried.

" It—it's the ghost ! " quavered Kay. " It——"

Her utterance was interrupted by another shriek—a shriek so chilling, so shrill, that momentarily it made them all start back. Then Ralph Douglas set his teeth.

" Who is it ? " he cried.

There came a burst of hollow, ghostly laughter.

Mavis, though shaken, was staring angrily round. Instinctively she had stepped up to the white-faced and trembling Kay. Again the shriek rent the air.

" It came from the gallery ! " Mavis suddenly cried. " There's someone up there, playing tricks——"

" Just wait till I catch the bounder," Dale Frensham vowed. " Mavis——"

But Mavis, convinced now that some joker was at work, had rushed forward. Her example acted like a tonic on the others as, willy nilly, they pelted after her. Up the gallery stairs they surged, Kay bringing up the rear.

Mavis was the first to reach the gallery, and hastily she switched on the light. Then she blinked.

" Why, there's—there's nobody here."

And then she jumped as, from below, there came the sound of a ringing boyish laugh.

" Come down, everyone ! You won't find the spook there," the voice chuckled.

They all rushed for the banister rail, and peered down into the hall. Then a shout went up.

" Dick ! "

" Dick Farrell ! "

" You spoofer ! "

Again came the merry laugh as dark-haired Dick Farrell, a small portable gramophone in his hands, stepped from a door near the wide fireplace. He looked up at them and burst out laughing.

" That took you all in, didn't it ? " he chuckled.

" Come on ! We'll scrag the blighter ! " Dale Frensham cried.

And with indignation taking the place

of fright they swept down the stairs—just as the door opened and the tall, commanding figure of Squire Williams himself stepped into the hall.

"Dick, you are an idiot——" panted Mavis.

"You've nearly scared poor Kay out of her wits——"

"Who—me?" The smile faded from Dick's good-looking face. He gazed at Kay, who was still trembling a little in her reaction, but who was beginning to look just a little angry now. "Oh, Kay, I'm sorry," Dick muttered. "I was trying to introduce a few realistic noises——"

"You mean," Ralph Douglas cried scornfully, "you were trying to scare the girls!"

"No, I didn't mean to. Honest——"

"Then why——"

"Hallo, what is all this?" Squire Williams broke in, coming forward. "Kay, my dear! Why, bless me, you're as white as a sheet. What's been happening?"

"That idiot—Dick, sir—has been making ghost noises!" Ralph Douglas said scathingly.

"What? Farrell——"

"I'm sorry, sir," Dick answered contritely. "I—I only played this old record in the room there. I—I thought it might liven up things a bit——"

He was genuinely sorry now. Fond of fun, the leader in every lark, it was, nevertheless, Dick Farrell's last intention really to upset anyone.

Mavis could see that. She understood Dick—hadn't he been her chum from childhood upwards? She hastened anxiously to interpose.

"I'm sure, Squire, that Dick didn't mean any harm."

"That is what most fools say when the harm has been done," the Squire retorted scathingly. "Farrell, you know that Kay is of an extremely nervous disposition."

"Yes, sir. I-I'm sorry," Dick mumbled. "If I'd only thought——"

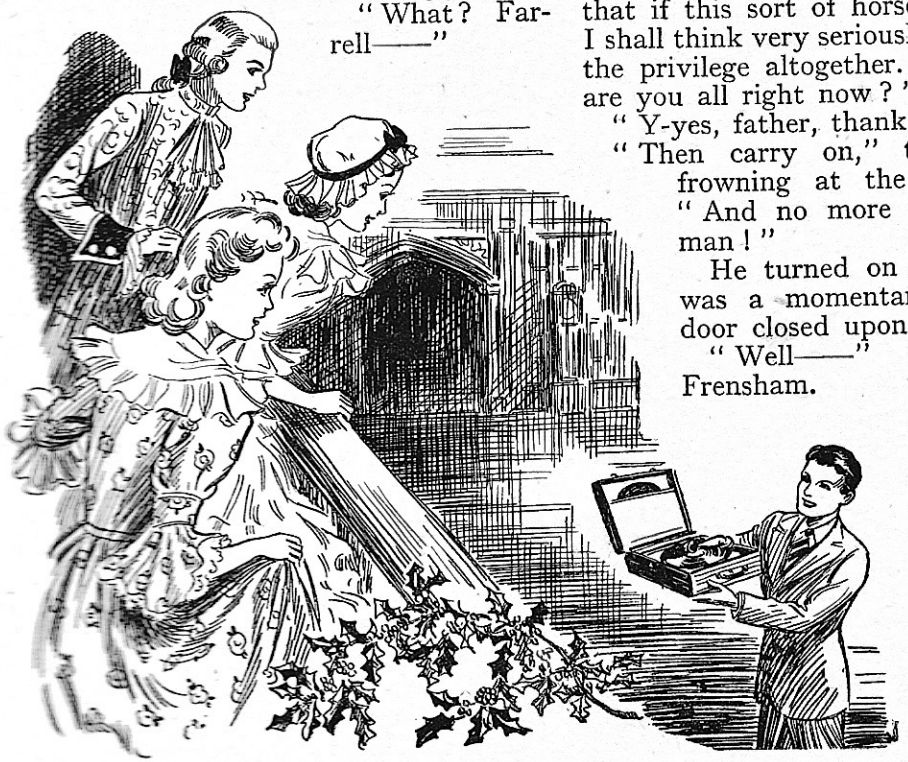
"Then please do in future," the Squire said curtly. "I know you're fond of fun, Farrell, but please remember that some jokes are not amusing fun. I've lent you my hall so that you can rehearse your play—not to frighten my daughter out of her life. Remember that—and remember, too, that if this sort of horseplay is repeated I shall think very seriously of withdrawing the privilege altogether. Kay, my dear, are you all right now?"

"Y-yes, father, thank you."

"Then carry on," the Squire said, frowning at the red-eared Dick. "And no more nonsense, young man!"

He turned on his heel. There was a momentary silence as the door closed upon his tall form.

"Well——" breathed Dale Frensham.



"Come down, everyone! You won't find the spook up there!" Dick Farrell declared, and with a chuckle he held up the portable gramophone. Mavis and Co. stared indignantly as they realised how they had been tricked.

" I'm frightfully sorry," Dick said again. " Blow it, don't rub it in. It was a silly ass trick—I can see that now. I wouldn't have scared Kay for anything. Kay, if there's anything I can do to make up for it——"

" There isn't, thank you," Kay said, a little distantly.

" Just promise not to do it again," Mavis said severely.

" Well, of course I will——"

" Right-ho, then that ends the matter," Mavis decided finally. " Anyway, let's start again, otherwise we'll never get finished. Goodness though, isn't it getting dark. Turn up the lights, Ralph, and we'll go back to the beginning."

And once more the amateur play-actors, their disturbing interlude now forgotten, proceeded enthusiastically with their rehearsal.

CHAPTER II

BANISHED FROM THE PLAY

" OH, Dick's good ! " Mavis told herself with enthusiasm. " Goodness knows what we should do without him."

With sparkling-eyed pride she watched the rehearsal progress. Certainly Dick, acting now as if to atone for his foolish trick, was excelling himself. He seemed to carry the play along with him, with hardly a hitch, hardly a stumble in that first thrilling act. If Dick only acted like this on the night, the success of the " Ghost of the Grange " would be brilliant.

Everybody, inspired by Dick, seemed to be on top of their form. Even Kay seemed to forget her nervousness as the show progressed. By the time Act One came to an end she was actually smiling.

" That's splendid," Mavis voted. " Now we'll just run through the ghost scene. All ready for Act Two please."

Enthusiastically the players grouped. Mavis, gazing round, signed to Dale Frensham to begin and on the same smooth note that Act One had ended, so Act Two progressed. All went swimmingly, indeed, until it came to Kay's line which heralded the first glimpse of the ghost—no real ghost, as it happened, because the ghost did not appear in the play, proving only to be an illusion on Dale Frensham's part. But no sooner had Kay got out the words : " Listen, what is that—— " than :

" Ah-a-a-a-a-a ! " went up a sudden vibrating scream, and simultaneously the lights went out, plunging the hall into almost inky darkness. From Kay came a faint, frightened cry.

" Dick ! " Dale Frensham shouted furiously. " Dick, you—— "

" Look ! " shrieked someone.

For suddenly, from above, had come a clanking sound. Above the banisters of the gallery a dim, luminously glowing shape could be seen.

" The mean rotter ! " Dale shouted. " After him ! "

It was he, this time, who led the rush. Up the stairs, in the darkness, they all blundered. There was an exclamation from above, then a sudden fluttering sound as the " ghost " skipped along the gallery and down the opposite flight of stairs which led back into the hall.

" Catch him ! " cried Dale

But the " ghost " had a good start then. By the time the players had reached the head of the stairs he was already mingling with the shadows of the hall. For an instant they saw his glowing robes against the dark panels ; then came a snick, a stifled scream and the apparition had vanished through the wall near the fireplace.

" It's Dick again ! " cried Elaine Fenn. " Come on, we'll have him this time ! "

Down the stairs they all plunged, Mavis among them, but Mavis sick at heart now. That Dick could repeat his trick after his promise ! For a moment a sense of disgust swept over her, but even that was tempered with wonder and bewilderment, for this was so unlike the Dick she knew, despite his fondness for prank-playing. But now they were darting across the floor. Another moment and Dale Frensham was furiously hurling himself at the door leading off the hall. In the same instant somebody found the lights and switched them on.

Then—

" Look ! " cried Ralph Douglas.

For, under Dale's impact, the door had crashed open. And there, crouched in the corner against the wall, her hands to her face, was Kay Williams. Before her, startled by the sudden invasion of the room, was Dick!

"Farrell, you cad!" Ralph Douglas cried. "Kay—oh, poor kid, she's shaking like a leaf! Kay, what happened?"

Slowly Kay took her hand from her face. She shrank back as she looked at Dick.

"He—he——" she murmured.

"Kay, what is it?" Mavis cried, springing forward.

"He"—Kay gulped—"he caught my arm and—and pulled me into this room. He——" And then there was a step, as the figure of Squire Williams was seen at the door, and the Squire entered. Kay ran forward. "Daddy!" she cried and clung to him, burying her face in his coat.

Squire Williams soothingly patted her shoulders, and then, with the fiercest frown Mavis had ever seen on his face, bent his eyes upon Dick Farrell.

"Young man!" the Squire barked angrily.

Dick had straightened. Squarely he looked the Squire in the face.

"I hope, sir, you don't think that I had anything to do with this?"

"By ginger, sir, I think nothing else. I heard what my daughter said!"

"Oh, goodness!" Mavis cried. "Squire, I'm sure that——"

"Just a minute, Mavis, please!" He swept her aside. "Farrell, I have already warned you once this afternoon about playing tricks——"

"But I didn't do this, sir," Dick sturdily defended himself.

"Then perhaps," Ralph Douglas broke in, not without a hint of a sneer in his voice, "you will tell us what you're doing here?"

Mavis gulped now. Confused thoughts were hammering in her brain. She couldn't—just couldn't—believe that Dick had so callously broken his promise, but even liking him as she did, she could not deny that every scrap of evidence was against him.

"Dick, do explain," she cried.

"I certainly will," the boy replied. "I went out to get something—something for Kay. I was sorry I upset her by playing that fool trick with the gramophone record——"

"Yes?" the Squire said, with no certain conviction in his tones.

"I wanted to make it up to her," Dick resumed. "I had an idea of getting her some chocolates from the village shop——"

"Then where are they?" Ralph Douglas asked.

"Like an ass, I forgot until I'd nearly reached the shop, that I had no coupons——"

A murmur arose. Mavis bit her lip. She believed Dick, even though the excuse sounded so unconvincing—it was just the impulsive sort of thing Dick would do. The Squire, however, was entirely unimpressed.

"And then?" he asked.

"Then I came back here—to find the place absolutely in darkness and the dickens of a commotion going on. Then I heard this door bang and in the darkness I rushed in. And that's all, except that just as I heard Kay cry out, somebody switched on the light—"

He stopped. There was a moment's silence. In disbelief Ralph Douglas shook his head. Mavis, again staring at the Squire's iron-hard face, felt her heart drop. But the Squire, if stern, was fair. He turned to Kay.

"Well, Kay, and what's your version?"

"I—I hardly know. I—I was in the hall," Kay stuttered. "Then suddenly the ghost, all gleaming and white came rushing down the stairs at me. I screamed. Then the—the ghost grabbed me by the arm and pushed me into the room. The next thing I remember is the light going up and finding Dick here in front of me."

"And all the rest of us," Ralph Douglas stated quietly, "were chasing the ghost. You were the only one in this part of the premises, Farrell!"

"But I've already told you how I came to be here," Dick retorted.

"We've only got your word for it!"

"Why you——"

" Please wait a minute," Mavis cried distractedly. " Let me speak. Kay, you say that the ghost was dressed up in some sort of a robe ? "

" Yes. A sort of gleaming thing like a monk's habit."

" Then," Mavis cried triumphantly, " it couldn't have been Dick, because—well, where's Dick's robe ? "

For a moment the Squire's face relaxed. The suspicion that had been in the expressions of the others lifted a little. But only for a moment. The next, with a little cry, Ralph Douglas had darted forward.

" Wait a jiffy, what's this ? " he cried.

There was an old chest, standing crosswise in one corner. Behind it Douglas plunged a hand. When the hand triumphantly reappeared it held a whitish garment which Douglas, rapidly shaking out, revealed as a monk's habit.

A cry arose. Immediately all eyes swivelled to Dick, who stared at the garment in blank amazement.

" I tell you I know nothing——" he almost shouted.

" No ? " Douglas cried scornfully. " It's pretty easy to see what happened now, Dick Farrell. You realised you'd gone too far. You snatched off this robe and chucked it behind this chest——"

" Douglas, you dare——"

" Dick ! " Mavis sharply cried, as her chum made an angry movement towards his accuser. " Dick, no ! "

" That'll do ! " the Squire curtly broke in. " I don't think, Farrell, there's any doubt in the matter now. Not satisfied with playing one stupid trick, you must play another, scaring my poor girl out of her wits——"

" But I tell you, sir——" Dick blazed.

" Please don't bother," the Squire said angrily. " The evidence speaks for itself. I gave you a warning. You chose to ignore it. You made a promise. You have failed to keep it. Farrell, as this is my house and as it is my daughter you are frightening, I order you to leave it at once and never enter the place again."

Dick turned white. In sudden dismay the players stared at each other. Then a cry broke from Mavis.

" Oh, but, Squire, the play ! "

" I'm sorry about the play. Those are my orders," the Squire said inflexibly.

" But—but Dick is our leading boy."

" Then I'm afraid, Mavis, you'll have to find another. Kay my dear, come home, please. Farrell, you'd better go, too, while I can still see you."

" Thank you, sir," Dick said angrily. " I'll go. I don't need to be watched. Mavis, I'm sorry, but I assure you I had nothing to do with this——"

" Farrell ! " the Squire boomed.

Dick threw him a look—a proud, defying look. Then, snatching up his cap, he departed without another word. Kay, biting her lips, looked at Mavis.

" Mavis, I—I'm so awfully sorry——"

Abruptly the Squire touched his daughter on the shoulder, with a brief nod to the rest of the company steered her towards the door. It opened. It closed, and in glum dismay Mavis faced her chums.

" Well, that has certainly spoiled our play," she said flatly.

" Dished ! " glumly assented Dale Frensham.

" And all because Farrell would insist upon playing the fool," Ralph Douglas said angrily.

" But what are we going to do ? " Elaine Fenn inquired frantically.

There was no immediate answer to that question, though it was the question uppermost in all their minds. There was no doubt that Dick was their star actor—no doubt that without Dick the play was doomed.

" Supposing," Ralph Douglas inquired thoughtfully, " that somebody else takes Farrell's part ? "

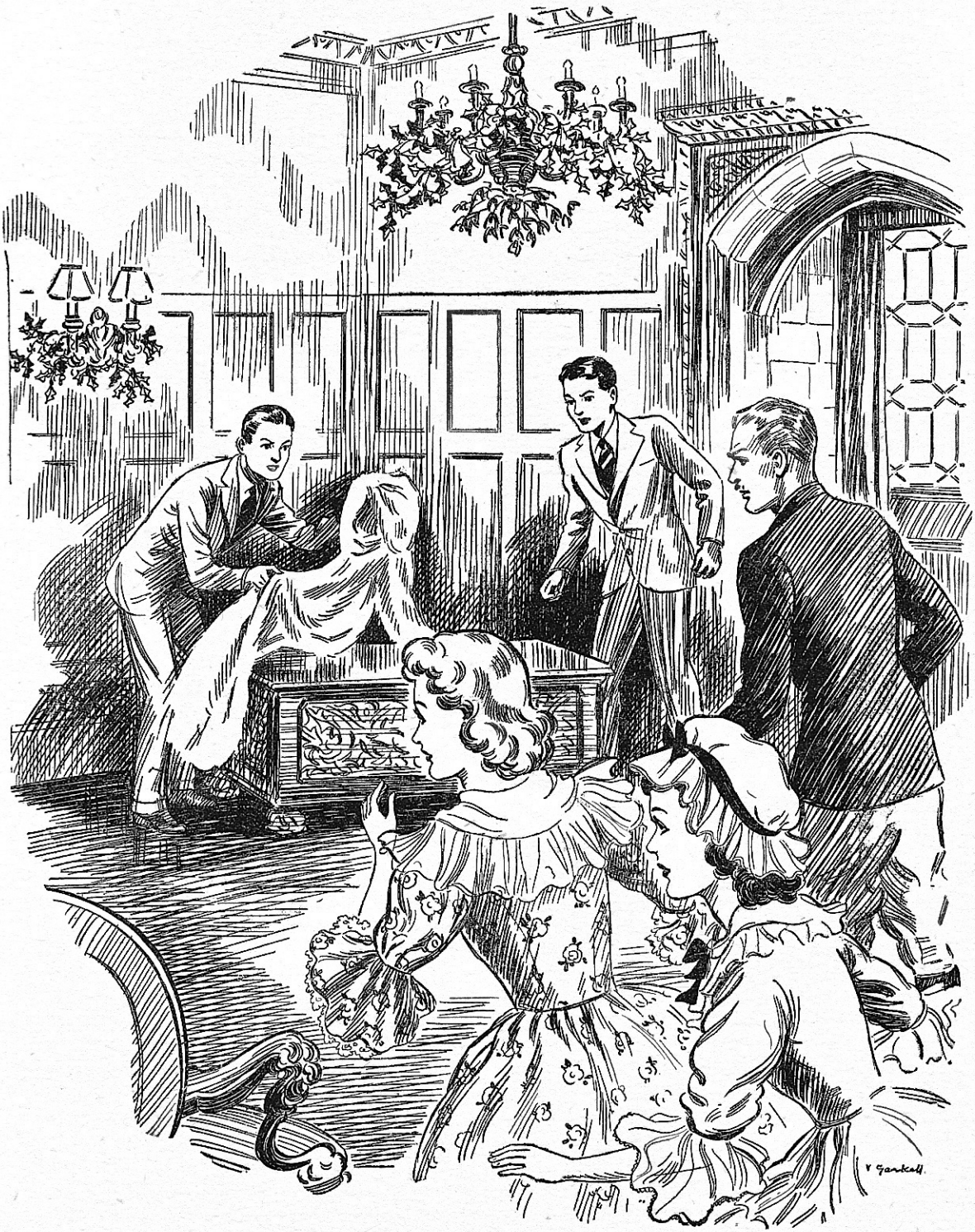
" But who ? " Mavis burst out.

" Well, it's either that or calling the play off, isn't it ? " asked Ralph.

" Then supposing you have a shot at the part," Dale suggested.

" Oh, but Ralph doesn't know the part ! " Mavis cried.

" No ? " Ralph Douglas looked at her queerly. " I'm not so sure. I've been at every rehearsal so far, and I do believe I know the whole play backwards. If Mavis likes to give me a chance——"



Startled cries arose as Douglas produced the eerily glowing robe from the old chest. This seemed to prove definitely that Mavis's boy friend had been the trickster who had scared Kay Williams.

" But what about your stage managing?" Mavis cried.

The boy shrugged.

" Well, what about it ? Is that such a worry ? There's not much to do. I practically finished the last big job this morning—the painting of the scenery for the Blue Room scene ; another hour's work this evening will find it all done. Anyway, let me try," he added eagerly.

" Oh, Mavis, yes, give Ralph a chance," pleaded Elaine.

Mavis thought swiftly. Dick, obviously, was out of it. Except for Douglas there was no one on whom she could call. Without realising she had done so, she picked up the discarded robe.

It felt sticky and moist to the touch ; and heavy with clinging phosphorous.

She believed Dick in spite of the evidence against him ; in spite of the fact that the others disbelieved. She had known Dick too many years to doubt his word, and no boy who had stood up to the Squire as he had could possibly be guilty. Yet——

" Mavis, why hesitate ? " Dale Frensham cried.

Mavis bit her lip. Then still fingering the robe she suddenly paused and gazed sharply down at it. Rather queerly she eyed them all.

" Supposing," she asked, " I have a good think about it ? Supposing we leave it till to-morrow's rehearsal, and I'll make a decision then ? Meantime Ralph——"

" Yes," Douglas said eagerly.

" Perhaps," Mavis murmured, " it will be just as well if you finish painting that scene and glance over Dick's lines."

At which Ralph Douglas smiled with satisfaction, and a sigh of relief went up from the rest of the cast. But there was still a queer gleam in Mavis' eyes.

CHAPTER III

MAVIS ACTS A PART

AFTER the others had gone, Mavis' face was thoughtful for several minutes.

Finally she carefully packed the robe into her attache case and went home. There, in her own room, she examined it carefully. Eventually she unstitched the hem of one sleeve and cut out a small portion of the material which had formed part of the underhem of the sleeve.

There was more than a hint of excitement in her eyes when she went out again. This time her steps took her to the village general shop which was just on the point of closing. The gleam was still in her eye when, emerging from the shop, she ran full tilt into a boy who was in the act of passing the door.

" Why, Ralph ! " she cried on a note of pleased surprise, for Ralph Douglas it was. " I thought you'd be studying your new part."

He grinned confidently.

" I know it," he said.

" What ? Already."

" Yes, I'm pretty quick." He grinned again.

" And—and what about the scenery ? Have you finished painting that yet ? "

" Not quite—but don't worry. Actually I have given it a dab or two, but I've had to break off because I've got to go and see my uncle——"

" Yes ? "

" Uncle Gerald—you know, the one that used to be an actor. He'll be tickled to death when he knows I've bagged the big part in your play."

" Oh, yes, I remember him," Mavis said. " He always said you'd never be able to act, didn't he ? He lives at Rendlewick, doesn't he ? "

" That's right," Douglas agreed, " and that's where I'm off to now. Pity there are no buses, but it won't take long to walk. 'Bye, Mavis. And don't worry about me. You can bet that I won't let you down."

With that he raised his cap and jauntily strode off, leaving Mavis eyeing his vanishing form with a thoughtful frown upon her face. Then she smiled.

" Righto, now to see Dick," she said.

She hurried off up the village street. Five minutes later she was knocking at the door of the house in which Dick Farrell lived. It was Dick himself who opened the door. The gloomy look that was on his face dissolved into a smile as he recognised his visitor.

" Why, Mavis, fancy you ! Come in ! "

Mavis went in. In the drawing-room, Dick, rather hesitantly, faced her.

" Mavis, I'm frightfully sorry about the play. But you—you don't think I played that trick, do you ? "

" Dick, of course not. But somebody did."

" And if I knew the blighter——" Dick said fiercely.

" Perhaps," Mavis said, " we'll find out. If we don't—well, it's just hopeless. If Ralph takes your part the show won't be much good at all ! "

" I'm afraid that's true ; he's no actor," Dick said gloomily. " But—but if he doesn't play it, who will ? "

" You ! "

" Eh ? When the Squire's banned me——"

" The Squire has only banned you because he thinks you're guilty," Mavis pointed out. " Once he's convinced that it was someone else who frightened Kay—why, then, things will be all right. But, Dick, we've got to get to work—and work quickly. I've got an idea."

He stared at her.

" An idea for what ? "

" For bowling out the real trickster, chump. Dick, listen—and then do exactly as I tell you——"

Dick listened, at first doubtfully, then with growing enthusiasm. When Mavis had finished speaking he nodded.

" Sounds O.K., but supposing we're on the wrong track ? "

" That's something we've got to risk," Mavis said. " Anyway, it's our one hope of getting you back into the show. You'll do as I ask, Dick ? "

" Like a shot," Dick replied.

" Then come on. Let's get moving."

Dick nodded. Mavis, tensed up now, stepped through into the moonlit road as Dick opened the door, grabbing his cap as he did so. Together they strode along the street to the village post office. There Mavis stepped into the public call-box, leaving Dick outside. At the end of a few minutes she came out.

" O.K. ? " Dick asked, as he met her outside.

" So far, yes," Mavis assured him. " But oh, golly, what a flop if it doesn't work ! "

Anxiously Dick nodded.

" Well, what's the next move ? "

" We make for the oak-tree on the Rendlewick road. Come on."

Cheerily Dick fell into step beside her. The oak-tree was a famous landmark just outside the village, and in the bright moonlight could be seen even now. In ten minutes they had reached it.

" Stop just here—in the shadow," Mavis said. " Now you know what you have to do, Dick ? "

" Trust me ! " Dick said grimly.

Mavis nodded. Anxiously she looked up and down the moon-bathed road. Was she, perhaps, on the wrong track after all ? Had she got an entirely mistaken idea of what was necessary ?

" Dick, get ready," she said suddenly, as a faint step sounded on the grass-covered path that ran parallel with the road, and in the distance a dark figure appeared. " I believe this is our man——"

Dick braced himself. Nearer and nearer the soft steps approached. Then suddenly Dick faced Mavis and began to speak.

" Mavis, I swear I didn't play the ghost. I'd give anything to prove my innocence!"

Abruptly the footsteps stopped. Mavis gave Dick a wink, encouraging him to play up to her.

" Dick, you know I believe you," she said. " And there's no need for you to worry, because your innocence can be proved. I can prove you aren't the Phantom Monk ! "

" Mavis, how ? "

" I'm not going to tell you, but I've found out something. You know the cupboard under the gallery where we keep the props—well, there's something in there that I'm going to get hold of. No, don't ask me what it is, Dick, because I don't want you or anyone else interfering in this. Anyway, once I've laid my hands on it, there'll be no question as to who played the ghost."

" And—and when are you going to get it ? " Dick asked eagerly, acting now for all he was worth.

" To-night."

" What time ? "

" About eight. Just after I've finished my music lesson."

" Oh, Mavis, let me come."

" No," Mavis said firmly. " I've told you, Dick, that I want nobody else in this. I'm going to do the job on my own. And seeing the time's getting on," she added practically, " I'd better get cracking now. You can walk home with me, if you like."

In the darkness Dick grinned as they fell into step at Mavis' side. Still talking, they went off. But no sound, no movement came from the oak-tree now.

" Mavis, do you think it worked ? " Dick asked when they reached the village.

" I only hope it did," Mavis answered fervently. " Good-bye now, Dick."

And leaving him, she hurried on, her heart drumming now. She had carried out the first part of her plot. But would it succeed ? Only the future could tell that.

CHAPTER IV

THE GHOST WHO GAVE HIMSELF AWAY

EIGHT o'clock !

High in the sky the moon still rode, though obscured now from time to time by passing clouds. And only the gentle breezes rustling the ivy on the black shape of Greenletts Grange disturbed the stillness. Cautiously Mavis approached the gaunt ancient mansion.

A swift look to right and left and she had reached the door. With the key the Squire had lent her, she opened it and stepped softly into the dark hall beyond. She did not switch on the light because there was no light at this time of night, the Squire always sending his aged gardener along after the rehearsals to turn off all current at the master switch.

Softly Mavis closed the door. Then for a moment she stood listening. There was no sound except the sigh of the breeze outside. She drew out her torch. A beam of light stabbed through the darkness and she carefully groped her way towards the cupboard beneath the gallery.

" Now, where is it ? " she muttered aloud, as she opened the door.

The cupboard contained the various properties used by the players, but built into its top was a narrow shelf. Along that shelf Mavis fumbled.

And then a triumphant exclamation left her lips.

" Got it ! "

She extracted a long bulky envelope. With it in her hands she retreated a pace, flashing her torch upon it. Then suddenly she stiffened. What was that ?

Quickly she wheeled, flashing her torch. Her voice cut into the darkness.

" Hello, anybody here ? "

But the sound was not repeated.

" Oh, just a mouse or something ! " she said aloud to herself. " But thank goodness I've found it. Now to find out who is the real ghost, and clear Dick."

She placed the torch on the near-by table. Slipping out the papers contained in the envelope she bent over them. And then suddenly——

" Give those to me ! " a voice cried.

With a gasp Mavis twisted. And then she staggered back, her hand going to her lips to stifle the involuntary scream which rose to them. For there, not five yards away, was a glowing figure dressed from head to foot in white—the figure of the ghost of Greenletts Grange.

" Help ! " Mavis cried.

She turned, her fingers grabbing at the paper. And then in a flash the apparition was upon her. A very human and a very savage wrist caught at her own. As she would have screamed again, a hand was clapped over her mouth. And then fiercely the apparition snatched up the paper with his free hand. He was in the act of ramming them into his robe when——

" O.K., Mavis, I'm here ! " called a cheery voice from the gallery above. As the fake phantom made a blind rush to get away, there was the whizz of a human body rushing through the air.

That was Dick, who had been hidden in the gallery. Dick, dropping to the floor, launched himself at the phantom. There came a shriek as he landed on the phantom's shoulders, a gasp from Dick as he rolled over with him, as the two became engaged in a whirling, wrestling embrace. Then suddenly the door whipped open.

Half a dozen torches flashed into the darkness and the booming voice of Squire Williams rose above them all :

" Gad ! What is all this ? Jenkins, go and turn on the lights."

" Dick, hold him ! " Mavis panted.

Dick was doing that all right, despite the struggles of his victim. Now there was a rush of feet across the floor. Squire Williams, Dale Frensham, Elaine Fenn and half a dozen others reached the scene just as the lights went up. And then as they saw the struggling two a cry went up.

" Dick——"

" Then Dick's not the ghost ! "

" Don't burble ! " Dick panted. " Help me to hold him."

Dale and two other boys sprang forward. The helpless phantom was jerked to his feet. And then, as they all saw his face a cry went up.

" Douglas ! Ralph Douglas ! "

" You ! " exploded the Squire. " Then —then you were the ghost ! "

" Yes, sir, he was the ghost," Mavis said. " And it was Douglas, this afternoon, who scared Kay."

" Young man ! "

" How did you find out ? " Ralph Douglas scowled at Mavis.

Mavis smiled.

" Just by making you give yourself away," she said. " And also by the aid of a little clue you left on the sleeve of the other robe. That clue," she added, meeting the Squire's frowning eyes, " was a spot of blue paint."

" By James ! " the Squire said. " But how did that tell you——"

" It didn't—at first," Mavis said. " Anybody might have put it there. But everybody doesn't use phosphorescent paint, and I fancied that when I found out where that came from I should know the trickster. I must admit, though, that the spot of blue paint first made me think of Ralph Douglas because he's been painting blue scenery for the play."

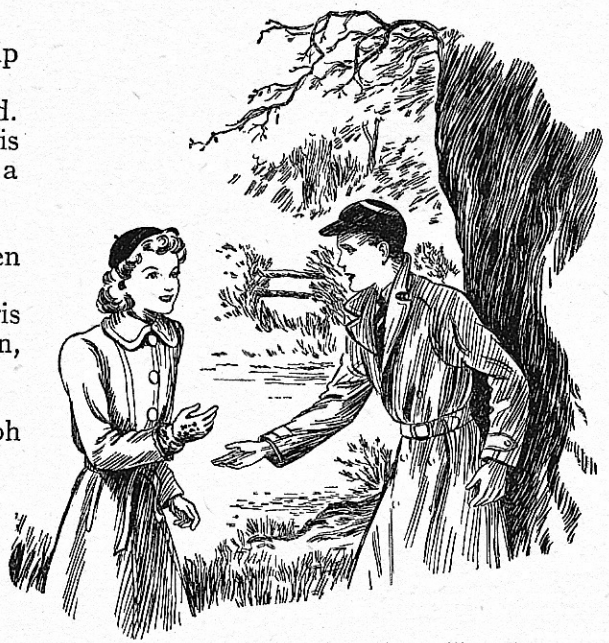
They all clustered round.

" And so," Mavis went on, " knowing that Douglas buys his paint from the village shop I went there and made inquiries. When I found out that he had recently bought phosphorescent paint there, too, I felt I was on firmer ground. So, knowing that Douglas had gone to Rendlewick I arranged a little play-acting with Dick here for Douglas to hear on his way back."

Ralph Douglas glared.

" You mean that—that scene by the oak tree was all faked ? "

" Yes, Ralph—all of it," Mavis laughed. " It was a chance, I admit. I was relying on your own guilty conscience to make you fall into the trap we laid. You thought



" Don't worry ! " said Mavis, smiling cheerfully at Dick. " I can prove that you aren't the Phantom Monk ! "

I had proof of your guilt. You thought I should be looking for that proof alone. When, all the time I arranged for Dick to be in hiding, and I'd phoned up the Squire and these others to come along, so that there should be no doubt as to who the phantom was. And, as you see——"

" Very nicely cleared up—oh, very nicely," the Squire agreed. " But the matter doesn't end here. Douglas, why did you go out of your way to scare my daughter ? "

" I didn't go out of my way to scare your daughter," Douglas replied.

" What ! When you know——"

" What I did," the culprit now explained, " was to try and get Farrell here blamed for playing pranks. The fact that Kay was so scared wasn't part of the plan at all."

" Indeed," the Squire said. " And why, young man, did you want Farrell out of the play ? "

" Perhaps," Mavis broke in, " I can answer that too. He wanted Dick out of the play because he wanted his part. In fact, I believe he's secretly been rehearsing it all along. And he wanted Dick out of the play because his actor-uncle at Rendlewick had promised him ten pounds if he took the leading part. Is that right, Ralph Douglas ? "

Douglas glared.

" And how," he demanded, " did you find that out ? "

" Simply because, dear boy, you were careless enough to scribble your last paint order on the back of a sheet of one of your uncle's letters. I found that out when I was at the village shop making inquiries. Well, Squire," she smiled as Douglas, clenching his fists, stepped back again. " Can we invite Dick to come back into the cast ? "

" Gad, girl, don't ask such silly questions," the Squire said. " Farrell. I offer you my most humble apologies, But you, young man "—and he bent a fierce glare upon the furious Ralph—" if ever I see you within a hundred yards of this house, I'll take a horsewhip to you. Now go ! "

And Ralph Douglas, with a sulky glare, went, while Dick was besieged on all sides by his overjoyed chums. It was the Squire, however, who put an end to those congratulations.

" I think," he murmured, " that a good idea now, boys and girls, would be to slip along to my house and tell Kay the great news. Also," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, " I fancy we might find a little snack there to cheer us all up."

The " little snack " proved to be a delicious supper, and the whole evening became a really cheery party.

Only one evening surpassed it in complete enjoyment. That was the evening a few days later when the village Christmas concert was held.

The hall was crowded long before the time for the curtain to go up. In addition to the Squire and all his friends, practically the whole village had turned out.

Mavis, taking a peep through the curtains, turned to Dick who stood at her side.

" Well, the Red Cross will do well whatever happens," she declared. " There ought to be a bumper profit, but—Dick ! " She caught nervously at his arm. " Do you think the play's going to be a success ? "

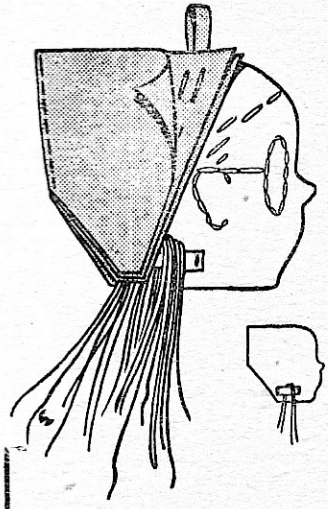
Dick laughed.

" I don't think it is—I know it is," he replied.

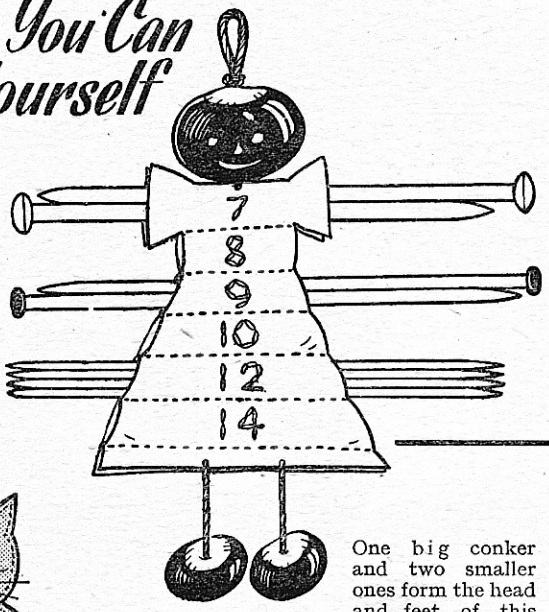
And he proved a true prophet.

NOVELTY GIFTS

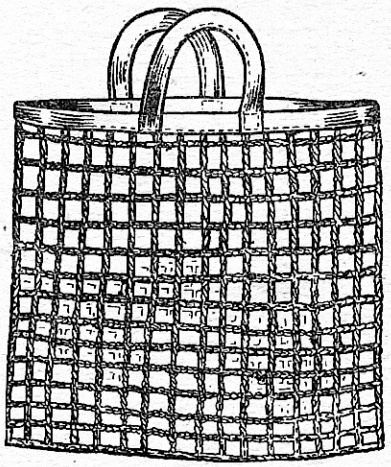
That You Can Make Yourself



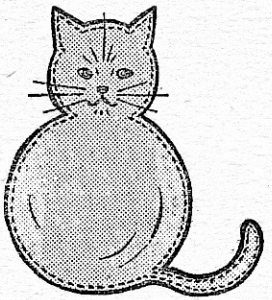
To make this novel needle-case cut one piece of felt to shape of head, as in little diagram. Mark in the face and spectacles with stitches; sew on a strip to hold wool, and a loop for hanging up. Then cut several pieces of flannel the shape of bonnet and stitch on to form needle-case.



One big conker and two smaller ones form the head and feet of this quaint novelty for holding knitting needles. The dress is of doubled thick material, or felt, and running stitches mark the divisions for the needles. The conkers are attached to the dress by means of the coloured strings or thick wool.



A strong shopping-bag can be made from string. Make a chain 12 inches long, turn and make a treble stitch into the 4th chain; make 4 chain and treble again. Continue to end of row. Turn with 7 chain, and continue as first row to depth of bag desired. Double over and join up sides. Bind top and make handles with coloured material or webbing.



Make this cute buttonhole decoration for a small friend by copying the drawing here and cutting it out in bright coloured felt or American cloth. Loose threads of wool make the whiskers, and beads the eyes.

This cheery doll is made from the top of an old stocking. Mark out with running stitches as shown for the head, body and legs. Stuff the lower part with cotton wool, pull up for the neck, then stuff the head. The arms are made from separate pieces. Loops of wool make the hair; curtain-rings the ear-rings, and stitches the face. The dress consists of a frilly skirt, tiny sleeves, and three bows.

The CASTAWAY OF PEARL ISLAND

By
LINDA MARTIN

When Joy Stevens and her fellow-passengers landed on the lonely Pacific Isle they feared that the Japanese invaders might be in occupation—instead, they encountered a mysterious Jungle Boy

CHAPTER I

THE BOY FROM THE JUNGLE

"OH, what a lovely island! Do let's explore!" cried Joy Stevens enthusiastically. With shining, adventure-filled eyes she gazed about her, and her impulsive suggestion was excitedly echoed by the group of boys and girls which surrounded her.

Above them towered gleaming yellow cliffs, overhung with trees whose golden fruits seemed to cluster on them like so many illuminated lamps. Behind them was the blue, tranquil Pacific Ocean, with their ship riding at anchor beyond the coral reef. And to the right a sparkling waterfall cascaded down the cliff, to form a tempting lake among the red rocks and the silver sand of the beach on which they stood.

Certainly this tropical isle—Pearl Island it was called—simply shrieked an invitation for further investigation.

"But we'd better get permission first," tall Ken Stanley observed thoughtfully. "Remember what the skip said about the possibility of the Japs landing here."

They all paused at that timely reminder—but Ken, as usual, was right. Pearl Island, for all its tropical charm, might hold deadly menaces, for this was in the early days of the war in the Pacific and no one knew what islands the Japanese invaders had landed on. It was, in fact, because the British steamer had been chased out of its course by the enemy that she had put in at Pearl Island, there to wait the radio news which would tell the captain when it was safe to depart.

"Hallo, here is Captain Calvert," said

Joy, as from round an outjutting headland the captain and six of his men appeared. " Let's ask him now."

It was she, as usual, who led the rush forward. Eagerly she raced up to the captain ; breathlessly she blurted out her request. The captain frowned.

" You know there might be danger ? "

" Oh, yes, captain, but we'll keep ever such a sharp look-out," Joy promised.

The captain exchanged a glance with his companions.

" Well, h'm—in the circumstances," he conceded. " Perhaps it is rather rough on you youngsters having to hang about with nothing to do. As far as I can see the island is completely unoccupied now, but one can never tell what the Japs are up to. Keep as near the bay as possible and be back by midday ! "

" Hurrah ! " shouted Joy, and the others joined in the cheer. " Come on, let's try that gap there," Joy urged.

The " gap " she referred to—really a dried-up river bed—was a hundred yards along the beach. It provided an easy method of reaching the cliff-top and eagerly they all ascended it. On reaching the top they looked about them, and Ken gave a surprised whistle.

" I say," he said, " the island's a bigger place than I took it for. It must stretch for miles."

That was apparent. Looked at from this height, the island was of impressive size. Like a map it lay before them, dotted here and there with fairy-like lakes, dense patches of jungle, and in the distance a high range of hills.

" Those woods over there look interesting," declared Joy, pointing. " I vote we explore them to start with."

The others agreed and so they set off, Joy and Ken leading the way. To reach the outskirts of the wood they had to plod almost knee-deep through thorny undergrowth and battle with the myriad insects which hummed and swarmed about their heads. But nobody, except Nora Platt, who was always inclined to grumble, cared a whit about those little difficulties.

" Strikes me," Ken observed, as they approached the dense belt of trees which was their objective, " that this isn't so much of a wood as a jungle."

That, too, was true. Pearl Island was certainly an island of deception. For now their " wood " loomed up as a dark, eerily silent jungle. Nora Platt surveyed it with a shiver.

" Oh, gosh, we're not going in there ? " she asked. " It—it looks like a ghost forest."

" Oh, bosh ! " scoffed Joy. " It looks just thrilling. Come on ! "

And she plunged into the dark green depths. Ken hurried past her to take the lead, and in single file the others followed, intrigued, thrilled, perhaps just a little nervous, but completely enjoying the delicious thrill of the enterprise. Now and again they paused as lemurs rustled in the branches above them. Once they all jerked to a violent standstill as a squawking school of parrots, alarmed at their approach, burst into a terrific cacaphony. Then they went on.

Fortunately there was no entangling undergrowth, though the trees grew so thickly in places that they stood almost trunk to trunk. The ghostly green light that filtered through the branches lit the scene with eerie illumination, though it was never so dark that they could not see their way. Once they saw crouching forms above them ; once a great green lizard-like creature snaked across their path, bringing a frightened scream from Nora. Then suddenly Ken, with a swift glance at his watch, frowned.

" Here, I say, we've been out nearly two hours. Hadn't we better be getting back ? "

" Oh ! " pouted Joy. " And I was just beginning to enjoy it ! "

" But we did promise Captain Calvert—— "

The reminder was enough for Joy. Enjoying herself as she was, Joy would never dream of breaking a promise, however carelessly given.

" Oh, well, all right," she said. " Anyway, we can come again this afternoon."

Reluctantly she turned. Not so reluctantly, perhaps, the others turned with her. What they all fondly hoped would be the homeward journey was begun.

Back through the trees they plunged. But it was less than five minutes before Ken halted.

" Look here, I'm sure we didn't come this way," he said.

" Oh, push on," Joy exclaimed with her usual unconquerable confidence. " We'll come out all right."

They pushed on. For half an hour they blindly plunged forward. Now they had no sense of direction, and there was nothing to guide them because they could not even see the sun. It was half-past eleven when there came a sudden wail from Nora.

" We're lost ! "

Even Joy did not scoff then. Realising a little dismally that Nora, for once, was right, she looked round. Green trees to right and left ; in front and behind, with no trace of a path.

" Seems to me," Hal Smith observed, " that we've been sculling around in a circle."

" But—but——" stuttered Joy. Then she stood rigid. " What's that ? " she breathed.

For suddenly, breaking the silence, came a distant, snarling roar. Nora blanched.

" Lions ! " she cried.

" Cuckoo ! " Joy scoffed. " There are no lions in this part of the world. They——" And then again she jerked upright. " Listen ! "

Questioningly, half nervously, they stared at each other as through the wood rung a most uncanny sound—the sound of a long, shrill, yet musical whistle.

" It—it's the Japs," shivered Nora.

" Listen ! " Joy repeated again.

Once more that penetrating yet musical sound vibrated on the silence.

" It's human, anyway," Ken decided. " If it isn't a Jap it might be a native who'll put us on the right track. Anyway, we'll risk an investigation. But be careful. I'll go first ! "

He picked up a broken branch that was lying at his feet. Thrilling, half fearful, the party followed him, ears pricked for a repetition of that strange whistle. But it did not come again.

On they crept, hearts leaping every time a twig snapped underfoot. Steadily the light began to grow stronger ; the trees to thin out. Then, ahead, they saw a sun-bathed clearing.

" Ken, I should think about here is where the voice came from," Joy muttered.

" I think so, too " Ken agreed. " But don't rush." He crept forward, cautiously, waving them to wait until he had reconnoitred. For a minute or two they watched him as he halted on the fringe of the trees and intently stared this way and that. Then his hand went up in a beckoning signal.

Eagerly they all hurried forward.

And then, joining Ken, they blinked. Bright sunlight splashed into their faces, but they saw at once that they were not out of the wood. Before them, forming a green arena, stood a tree-bound clearing and in the middle of that clearing was a solitary hut, thatched with reeds.

" Looks," Ken said, " as though we've made contact of some sort. But where's the owner of the desirable residence ? "

Cautiously, this way and that, they peered. But of human beings there was no sign.

" Oh, come on, do let's see," Joy said.

Intrigued, she stepped forward. Flashing a swift glance to either side, she approached the hut, Ken following in her steps. Then, reaching the shack, she stood still and blinked.

The hut was open on one side, its " door " being a rather old tarpaulin sheet which looked as if it might have been salvaged from some wreck thrown up on the beach. It was neatly secured at one side, disclosing at a glance the hut's surprising contents.

" Corks, who owns it ? " Hal asked, joining them.

They all stared, too taken aback for the moment to think of answering the question. In one corner of the shack was a neat bed of dried leaves and bracken, covered with an old, much-worn, blue blazer. Hanging on the wall beside it was the tattered remnant of what had obviously once been a school cap.

In the corner was a long bow, two or three sheaths of arrows, several cooking pots and an old sea chest.

" Gee, it must be Robinson Crusoe's island," Hal chortled. " But, I say, that's queer. That's an old Clareford cap ! "

" Meaning," Joy observed, " that the owner of the shack is English." She looked round again, remembering suddenly that human-sounding whistle. " But where is he ? "

" Probably left years ago," Nora sniffed. " I say, let's look in that chest ! "

" It doesn't belong to us," Joy demurred.

But Nora, who had no fine scruples, was already striding forward, her eyes ashine with curiosity now. Reaching the chest, she threw back the lid.

And then she stared.

" Great Aunt, look at this ! "

Intrigue overcoming compunction, they all stepped forward. And then again they blinked.

For the contents of the chest, thus revealed, were as surprising as the discovery of the hut. A pair of boots, which might have belonged to a small boy, one or two oddments of clothing, fishing net, a whip, several arrow shafts, and a rather exquisite skin bag, were the sight that met their gaze. Again Joy, baffled, looked round.

" Nice bag," Nora said, and picked up the skin bag. " Gosh, and it's got something in it," she added, weighing it in her hand. " Something jolly heavy. I——" And then, before anyone could stop her, she had plunged her hand into the bag, had withdrawn what at first sight looked like a handful of glass marbles, except that they shone in the sun as no glass marbles could ever have done. " Gosh ! " she shouted next moment. " What a find ! They're pearls ! "

" Pearls ? "

" Yes, rather, and jolly good ones, too," Nora cried. " I happen to know something about pearls because my father's a jeweller. I say, though, these must be worth pots——"

Angrily the Jungle Boy regarded Joy. " Are these friends who play such mean tricks ? " he demanded. " Think now that I would travel with them to Australia ? "

" Nora, put them back ! " Joy cried.

Nora grimaced.

" Not likely ! "

" Put them back ! They're not yours."

" Rats ! Findings keepings ! " Nora retorted.

" Finding's stealing, you mean," Joy cried. " Put them where you found them ! "

Nora scowled. There was a greedy glitter in her eyes as she dropped the pearls back into the bag.

" Don't be a fool, Joy," she said petulantly. " We can make use of these when we get to Australia.

Joy's eyes flashed indignantly.

" But——" she began, then, as she heard the sound of approaching footsteps, she darted out of the hut and looked across the clearing. " My golly, look ! " she exclaimed.

Her chums joined her, and in amazement they stared at the strange figure that was striding towards them. It was a tall, bronzed youth clad in an animal skin and carrying a spear. With black, flashing eyes he confronted them.

" And what, strangers, do you here, in the jungle boy's home ? " he demanded.

CHAPTER II

NORA'S SPITEFUL JOKE

With a sense of breathless fascination, Joy stared at the surprising intruder who stood there so magnificently, his head poised in challenging inquiry. From one to the other the black eyes flashed.

" What do you here ? " he demanded again. " And you, girl ! What do you with my pearls ? Put them back ! "

" I—I found them ! " Nora cried.

" Surely that does not make them yours ? " the jungle boy said disdainfully. " I order you, girl—put them back ! "

Nora hesitated, sulky mutiny in her face. But quickly Joy stepped forward and plucked the bag from Nora's hands.

" Nobody has any wish to take these if they are yours," Joy said, smiling at the boy's stern face. " But please tell us, who are you ? "

" Am I here to answer the questions of strangers ? " the boy demanded disdainfully. " This is my island and here I am king. Begone, all of you ! "

" Oh, corks, listen to His Majesty ! " Nora chortled. " And who proclaimed you king ? "

" You make fun ? " He stared at her. " None shall make fun of Leo. There is your path. Follow it, and it shall lead you back to the sea. Now begone ! "

" But look here——" Ken protested.

" Begone ! " Leo thundered.

" But I say, old man——"

The jungle boy's fingers went to his lips, and again came that penetrating yet musical whistle which, ten minutes before, had puzzled them all so much.

Immediately the signal was answered.

From near by came a sudden snarling roar, followed by a rustling of leaves. And then, through the trees, came bounding a great cat-like shape, eyes gleaming, tail swishing to and fro. One petrified look the chums cast at him, then they backed in alarm.

" A—a jaguar ! " stuttered Hal Smith.

" Oh, my goodness ! "

" Run, run ! " Nora shrieked.

The jaguar snarled, and crouched as if for a spring. Affected by Nora's shrieking panic, the whole party went scrambling for the spot which the strange boy had indicated. Only Joy, looking back, saw the odd smile on Leo's face, saw the playful flick he gave at the jaguar's ear and heard his single word of command : " Tcha." And at that the great cat, pleasedly purring, rolled over on his back, and, like some overgrown kitten, thrust his four paws into the air.

For a moment Joy checked her step, half tempted to turn back. The jungle boy fascinated her, but her chums by that time had reached the path ; were blindly plunging back into the trees. Loyalty to them caused her to fight against her impulse.

Leo had spoken the truth about the path. There was a path, narrow and tortuous, it is true, but quite well defined. With one last glance back Joy plunged on to it just as Ken, a little farther ahead, pulled up.

" Here, hang it. What are we running

away from?" he angrily demanded.

"Oh, come on," Nora cried. "If that awful savage follows us with his jaguar——"

"But——"

Nora, however, was leading the way, her obvious intention being to put as great a distance between herself and the threatened peril as possible. Ken flung a look at Joy, who, quickly interpreting, nodded. Together they followed.

Presently the pace slackened. Still the path wound on. They seemed to have traversed miles of it when finally full sunlight struck into their faces again. Emerging from the forest, they found the blue Pacific gleaming ahead of them. By that time it was one o'clock.

"Better step out," Ken advised. "Captain Calvert will be having fits."

And for the time being, at any rate, Joy put the Tarzan-like jungle boy out of her mind as she strode on with the others. A quarter of an hour later they had reached the beach where Captain Calvert, anxious and stern, was awaiting them.

"And where," he demanded, "have you been? I thought you understood——"

"And so we did," Nora cut in, "but we got lost, and some awful boy dressed in skins set a jaguar on us——"

"What?"

Then, of course, the story came out. Incredulous at first, the captain's expression changed to one of grim anger as he listened. And Nora, conveniently forgetting to mention her own provocation, put all the spite of which she was capable into her narration.

"You say he deliberately set the jaguar on you?"

"Deliberately," Nora maliciously affirmed.

"Oh, Nora, don't magnify it," Joy protested. "He never meant to hurt us, I'm sure. If you hadn't meddled with his pearls——"

And at that she jumped herself, a sudden guilty stain suffusing her cheeks as her fingers encountered those very pearls in their skin bag in her own pocket. Oh, goodness, she had forgotten to give them back, after all!

Wisely, she decided to say nothing then. Nora's jealous nature, would only make the worst of it. Nora, in fact, was quite capable of accusing her of robbing the jungle boy. But Joy resolved at the very first opportunity to seek him out, to hand the pearls back to him in person.

Visualising that prospect, indeed, she felt almost glad that she had unwittingly retained possession of the pearls. What a grand excuse to meet up with the handsome jungle boy again!

But she said nothing of her intention to her chums. Apart from her natural reluctance to advertise her possession of the pearls, she wanted no companions on her next visit to the mysterious Leo. Instead, she was from that moment watching her opportunity to slip away.

It came that afternoon when the boys had gone off fishing and the rest of the camp was taking a siesta in the hot afternoon sunshine. Joy, on a pretext of gathering fruit for tea, climbed back alone on top of the cliff.

"Oh, goodness, if I can only find him," she thought with a thrill.

Eagerly she started towards the distant jungle. But hardly had she taken a dozen paces when she stopped with a start. Behind her a soft voice spoke.

"Girl!"

Wonderingly Joy turned, to give an excited cry as she saw a tall, majestic, skin-clad form standing on the cliff edge.

"Leo!" she cried.

"Leo—yes," he agreed, and came forward, stopping a few paces from her and regarding her with such an intent scrutiny that Joy felt the colour rushing up under her skin. "You come to find me," he said.

"Why, yes, but how did you know?"

"You come to give me back my pearls——"

"Well, yes, but what made you guess it?"

"No great thought was necessary to guess it," the jungle boy answered. "I am a judge of good and bad. You, girl, you are good. While you had my pearls you would not rest. But that other girl; she is bad."

Joy smiled a little.

" Oh, not really. But—but—here take your pearls," she added, hardly knowing what to say now that she stood face to face with him. " It—it is strange to find you here," she added.

Again he looked at her questioningly, searchingly. Then he took an impulsive step forward.

" Girl, what is your name ? "

Joy told him.

" It is a name that fits," he approved. " It is a name I like—as I like you. You shall be my friend," he added.

" Th-thank you," Joy stuttered, hardly knowing whether to be pleased or offended by that abrupt decision, yet thrilled somehow by the masterfulness in his tones.

" Now sit here, on this rock with me, so that I may keep an eye upon your friends below. That is your ship which stands near the reef? " he added, as Joyce seated herself beside him.

" Yes," Joy nodded.

" 'Tis many years since I sailed on such a ship," Leo said with a touch of wistfulness in his voice. " It awakens strange feelings in me—feelings which, until I met you to-day, I have never before experienced. It is the only ship which has arrived at Pearl Island since the day the vessel which should have taken me to Australia was wrecked, leaving me the only survivor."

" Oh, Leo," Joy cried, and she laid sympathetic fingers on his arm. " Please tell me all about it," she said.

He smiled a little sadly, then complied with her request. It seemed that his father had been the captain of the ship which had been carrying a cargo of wild animals to Australia. Leo, then a young boy, had been the only one to be hurled ashore, and since then his only companion had been the jaguar, which had also managed to survive the wreck.

" Seven summers have come and gone since that day," Leo went on. " In the meantime I have seen no man. Yet I have grown wise to the ways of the island, and until to-day my thoughts had never turned to home or Australia again. Yet I must confess now," he added musingly, " that some strange sickness has laid its hand upon me. For the first time I find myself thinking of sights and people that I left behind. Tell me, Joy, since now I find myself liking you more and more, what is happening in the great world beyond ? "

Joy told him of the war which was raging and explained how her own ship had been diverted from its course because of the Japanese danger.

" Then—then you will soon be leaving the island ? " he asked, a queer note of emotion in his voice.

Joy nodded.

" As soon as we get news that it is safe for the ship to proceed," she said. " But—Leo, why should you not return with us ? "

" I ? " He looked startled.

" Why not ? " Joy eagerly persisted. " What is there to stop you ? Surely Leo you are not going to spend your life on this island ? Surely the great world across the sea calls to you ? Leo," she added as she saw the change that had spread over his face, " you may never get another chance. Come now—with me—and let me introduce you to Captain Calvert and my friends."

He looked doubtful.

" Your friends—they make fun," he demurred.

" Leo, they won't—I promise you. Please come ! " Joy urged.

He hesitated, then rose to his feet.

" Friend Joy, I am in your hands," he said simply. " Let us go ! "

Smothering her excitement, Joy rose and led the way to the beach. When she reached the foot of the cliff she saw that the boys had returned, a fire had been lit, and the girls were busy preparing tea. A cry went up as Joy and her companion were seen approaching.

" Great Scott, look what Joy's fished up ! " Nora cried. " The wild boy of Borneo ! "

" Leo, please," Joy said, as the jungle boy suddenly halted and made as if to depart. " Nora, stop it ! " she cried angrily. " Leo comes among us as a

friend. He is going to sail with us——"

"What?" Nora squeaked. "That freak?"

Leo's eyes flashed.

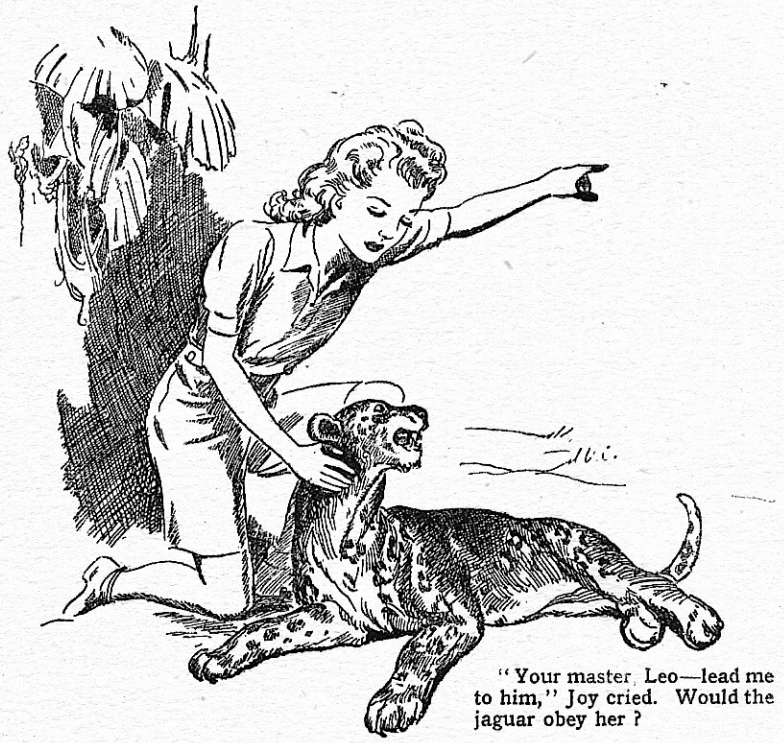
"Girl, your words offend me!" he cried.

Nora tittered.

"Oh, don't take any notice. That's the usual way I talk to kings. I ——" and then she gave a shriek as Katie Fisher stepped on her toe. "Look here——"

"Then shut up," Katie snapped. "Let's hear what the fellow has to say. I say, though, he is handsome! Mr. Leo, what about having tea with us?"

"Yes, rather, make room for him," Ken said hospitably, and Leo, looking strange and uncomfortable, was led forward. "Now, Leo, old chap——"



"Your master, Leo—lead me to him," Joy cried. Would the jaguar obey her?

Joy glowed, dear old Ken! What a loyal chum he was to back her up so! Awkwardly the jungle boy seated himself, puzzledly he looked at the mug of tea which was thrust into one hand and at the ham sandwich which was thrust into the other. He blinked at Joy.

"Surely this is food which I have not tasted for seven years," he said.

"Then," Joy laughed, "now's your chance to enjoy it again. And I can recommend the ham—it's wizard. We——"

And there, with a gasp, she stopped. In sudden furious indignation she leapt to her feet. For spiteful Nora, a gleam in her eyes, had stolen up behind the jungle boy, an empty ship's saucepan in her hands. Before Joy could intervene Nora had lifted the saucepan and had rammed it down upon the jungle boy's head.

"Look at the king!" she chortled. "We've crowned him at last."

From some of the campers there went up an involuntary laugh, but most of them looked sympathetic and indignant as, with an angry shout, Leo scrambled to his feet. With one wrench he tugged the saucepan from his head, and hurled it away. Then, grabbing up his spear, he straightened to his full magnificent height.

"I understood," he said bitterly, "that I had come among friends. Are these friends, Joy, who play such mean tricks? Think now that I would travel with you to Australia? Think you that I will desert my beautiful island for such strangers as you? Bah!"

"Leo," Joy quivered, "Leo, come back!"

But the jungle boy, turning on his heel, was running along the beach at a pace which even a hart could not have outstripped. In less than a minute he had vanished from view.

CHAPTER III

CAPTURED BY THE JAPS

"OH, I must, I must get him back!" That was Joy Stevens' first thought next morning.

It had not been a happy night for Joy It had been a night haunted with bitter

memories of the quarrel which had ensued between her and Nora Platt after the indignant departure of the jungle boy. It had been a night, too, when the shadow of renewed peril had thrown a dampening spirit upon the occupants of Pearl Island.

For last evening Captain Calvert had received orders to be ready to sail at a moment's notice—and not because the coast was clear, but because the Japanese were believed to have penetrated these waters.

So far no new orders had come through, but the whole camp was standing to. And if the Japs should come here Leo would fall into their hands!

"No," Joy cried impulsively.

She flung the bedclothes aside and hurriedly washed and dressed. She could not leave Leo to an unknown fate. She must find him, warn him, persuade him to sail with them.

Silently she crept out of the tent. Dodging the sentry who had been posted on the south side of the beach, she made her way to the steep river-bed which led upwards to the cliff summit. Arrived there she looked round, shouted the jungle boy's name, but there came no reply.

Joy bit her lip. If Leo was not here, then she would have to scout for him. Impulsively she plunged into the jungle, hoping to find the path by which they had emerged yesterday. For over an hour she wandered up and down, but she failed to find the path, nor had she any idea in which direction was the clearing where she had seen him.

"It's—it's no good," she told herself at last. "I'll have to give it up. But, perhaps," she hopefully thought, "Leo has seen the Japs and has gone to the boat on his own accord."

With that she turned. But difficult as her task of finding a way through the jungle had been, that of retracing her footsteps proved even more so. Another two hours passed before, panting and exhausted, she emerged from the jungle.

Instinctively her gaze went out to sea. Thank goodness the steamer was still there! Breathlessly she made her way down to the beach, but when she reached it she received an alarming shock. For not only was there no sign of the occupants of the camp, but all around lay the evidence of a savage struggle—discarded rifles, spent cartridges, and smashed open cases of stores.

"Oh, my goodness," Joy gulped. "What's happened? Surely——" Breaking off, she picked up one of the dropped rifles and the blood drained from her face as she examined it. "This isn't British!" she exclaimed. "Then—then the Japs have been here. The Japs have taken the rest of the camp prisoner!"

Further investigation soon proved the truth of that numbing discovery. Here were the traces in the sand where the Jap boat had landed; here the footprints they had made in their silent descent upon the unsuspecting camp; here another medley of prints pointing unerringly in the direction in which they had marched off. Heart in mouth Joyce followed the footprints.

They led back up to the cliff top, across an arid patch of sandy ground and into a wood so thick that it was almost dark beneath its trees. Then, suddenly, she pulled up as she found, barring her path, a twenty-foot wide ravine spanned only by a slender rope bridge. From the far side of the ravine there came the gleam of fires, and swiftly Joy darted behind a tree as she saw a Jap sentry standing on guard at the other side of the bridge.

"They—they are there," she muttered. "Oh, goodness, what shall I do?"

Quick thinking was required then. Obviously she, an unarmed girl, could do nothing. There was no help within call—the situation seemed hopeless. Supposing she could find Leo? She must find Leo! He was her only hope now!

But how, after her failure of the morning, could she hope to find the jungle boy?

Joyce did not pursue the thought. She'd just *got* to find Leo. Maybe, this time, she would have more success in locating the path that led to his hidden home.

Frantically she rushed back to the jungle, and once again that hopeless search commenced. And once again Joy was on the point of giving it up, then she saw a

sight that first caused her to jump with alarm, then set her pulses tingling with a swift idea.

For out of the jungle nearby a cat-like form had crept and, now seated, was watching her with yellow eyes full of intrigue and curiosity.

"The jaguar!" Joy gulped. "Oh, would—would he lead me to Leo?"

With that thought in her mind she approached. Suspiciously the jaguar crouched, baring his teeth. For a moment Joy quailed at the snarling sound which came from his throat, but remembering the jungle boy's treatment of the jaguar she fearlessly pressed forward. Now she was beside the animal, who was crouching as if ready to spring. Steeling herself, Joy stooped and flicked the animal's ears, at the same time uttering a half-laughing "Tcha!"

The effect was amazing.

For a second the jaguar eyed her as if undecided whether to spring or purr, then, as she repeated the strange word she had heard Leo utter, it rolled over on to its back.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Joy breathed, and, reassured, she dropped to her knees.

"Tcha," she said once again. "Leo! Your master, Leo—lead me to him."

She pointed and the jaguar, cocking its head, first looked puzzled, then, as Joy made feverish signs towards the trees, seemed to understand. A sudden purring sound left its throat. Abruptly it turned.

With hope renewed, Joy followed. Would the animal lead her to the jungle boy? Suddenly the jaguar gave an excited cry and, breaking into a run, disappeared among the trees. Recklessly Joy sprinted after it and suddenly she gave an excited cry. For there before her was the well-remembered path that led to the jungle boy's home!

"Oh, good boy—good boy!" she breathed.

The jaguar scampered on down the path and hopefully now Joy followed. At last she saw the clearing before her and a triumphant cry escaped her lips as she saw the superb figure of her jungle friend, standing by the hut.

"Leo!" she cried.

He did not seem surprised to see her, and with a smile came forward.

"Friend Joy, I hoped you would come," he said. "My heart has been sad since leaving you yesterday. But you appear distressed," he added, staring at her. "Friend Joy, what is wrong?"

Wonderingly, Joy watched the Jungle Boy prepare the fire. Was this part of his daring plan to outwit the Japanese?

Gulpingly Joy poured out her story. He looked grave.

"Surely this is bad news," he said. "But what do you wish me to do?"

"Leo, help me—please. They are my friends——"

"And the girl who insults me—is she

your friend also ? " he asked, a flash in his eyes. " I do not help her, friend Joy."

" But, Leo, you must—you must ! " Joy cried. " You cannot help the others unless you help her—she is a prisoner with them. Please, Leo ! " she pleaded.

For a moment he stood irresolute, changing expressions sweeping across his face.

" I will help," he announced at last. " But I will help, friend Joy, only because it is you who asks and because the plight of your friends makes you unhappy." He whistled to the jaguar. " Craka, come," he bade, and snatching up his spear, led the way.

Trembling, Joy followed him. Along the winding, dark jungle path they made their way. Presently they were in the open sunshine again, were traversing the sandy waste which led to the ravined wood. All at once Leo stopped and stared out to sea.

" Leo, what is it ? " Joy asked, staring with him. But, except for the steamer, still riding at anchor, she could see nothing.

" Let us go," Leo said, without answering the question. " Yet—wait ! Friend Joy, do you gather the loose bracken there while I collect these sticks."

Joy blinked in bewilderment, but unquestioningly she obeyed. While she swept the bracken into her arms, Leo gathered wood and broke several green boughs from a flowering bush near by. Then, producing a stone and a steel dagger from his belt, he smartly struck sparks into the pile. At once it began to blaze.

" Leo, why have you done that ? " Joy questioned.

" Perhaps," he answered mysteriously, " for no purpose at all. But quiet now, Friend Joy. We approach the enemy ! "

That was true. Joy found her heart thumping as once again she approached the wood. Stealthily they crept into it, only to halt as they came within sight of the fragile bridge.

Joy, peering along that bridge, saw that at its other end there were now two sentries instead of one, and that between them was perched a machine-gun.

" Joy, do you wait there. Keep your gaze upon the fire," the jungle boy said. " I go."

" But, Leo——"

And then Joy gasped again. For with a sudden upward spring Leo had caught at the branch of the nearest tree and in another moment had disappeared !

There came a slight rustle in the branches above and ahead of her, and then Joy's heart leapt as she caught one flashing glimpse of Leo, and guessed his daring intention.

Leo was climbing like a monkey among the interlacing branches which met high above the ravine—Leo was invading the prisoners' camp from the tree-tops !

Almost in agony she watched. What could the jungle boy do against so many ?

Minutes that seemed hours passed. No sound, no stir. The sentries, talking to each other, shifted restlessly from time to time ; they suspected nothing. And then again Joy's heart missed a beat, she felt a sudden foolish desire to scream out as she saw the branches above the Japanese guards lightly move. She guessed instinctively what was going to happen.

In the next moment it happened.

A lithe shape flashed against the background of the trees as Leo came hurtling from his lofty perch. Joy saw the blow he struck the first astonished sentry ; saw the Jap heel over and crash to earth ; saw the other wheel in amazed bewilderment. Not completely had he turned when Leo's hammer fist struck him between the eyes. In two seconds both sentries were laid low.

Joy shivered a little, but there was a gleam of admiration in her eyes.

Rapidly Leo trussed the unconscious sentries together. That done, he stood up and waved to her across the bridge. Then, snatching up the machine-gun, he vanished once again.

" Oh, goodness, now what is he going to do ? " Joy gasped.

Anxiously she stood there, then, seeing that the fire was growing low, she piled on more brushwood. The minutes passed and still there was no sign of the jungle boy. What had become of him ? What if he himself had been captured by the Japs ?

But no ! She took comfort from the fact that no one, as yet, had been to inspect the helpless sentries.

And then, just as she was beginning to despair, from a distant part of the wood came the sound of machine-gun firing. At once there was commotion in the camp —shouts, a sudden tramping of feet. Ten more minutes passed. More machine-gun firing ; more yells. Then another period of agonising silence.

Joy was finding the suspense almost unbearable when a sudden fluttering stir came from the wood beyond the ravine. Then her heart leapt as she heard voices.

The next moment, bursting towards the bridge, came a figure.

" Leo ! " she joyfully shouted.

The jungle boy saw her. He waved. But at the other end of the bridge he stopped, urgently beckoning with his hand. And then, to Joy's delight, she saw the figure of Nora, followed by Ken and Hal, and the other captives.

" Quick ! " she heard Leo cry. " The Japs are coming. Get across the bridge ! "

" Leo—he's done it ! " exclaimed Joy, as she ran to meet the reeling Nora and to catch her as she stepped from the swaying bridge. " Nora——"

" That boy ! " Nora gasped. " Oh, Joy, I ought to be whipped for saying the things I have said to him. He's saved us——"

But there was no time for more then, though Joy was to hear many vivid accounts later of how Leo, with his stolen Jap machine-gun, had hoodwinked the Japs into believing they were being attacked by a strong enemy force, how he had drawn off the whole Japanese garrison, and while they had been sniping and machine-gunning their own gun, had rushed to the relief of her friends. But now the released Britishers were pouring back in a stream across the bridge, and still at its other extremity Leo stood waiting till the last had gone. Then suddenly there were more shouts. Half a dozen rifle bullets whistled from the other side of the ravine.

" Leo ! " Joy cried. " Come on ! "

" I come," the jungle boy called.

He broke into a run, but at that moment there came furious shouts from the other side of the ravine, and a dozen Japs burst into view. Again Joy shrieked.

" Leo—hurry ! " she gulped.

Plucking the dagger from his belt, the jungle boy reached her side, then, stooping, he slashed at the creeper ropes which held the bridge in position. There came more shouts, the crackle of rifle-fire, but even as the infuriated Japs gained the edge of the ravine, the severed bridge crashed to destruction.

" Oh, Leo, how wonderful ! " Joy cried. " Thanks to you we're safe ! "

Once they were out of rifle range the rest of the party—even Nora—added their words of thanks. The jungle boy smiled.

" I am pleased," he said. " But we must hurry. Soon the Japs will find a way round the ravine, and then——" He stopped, staring towards the beach. The others stared, too, and suddenly their faces turned pale. For on the beach was a great ship's boat, and pouring out of it were more armed Japs.

" Reinforcements ! " gasped Nora. " We —we're beaten, after all ! Oh, Leo——"

She turned instinctively to the jungle boy and Leo calmly smiled.

" Stand still," he advised. " I think help comes. Friend Joy, you did not see with your untrained eyes, but when I bade you light that fire there was a British man-o'-war at sea. I think that it will have seen our signal."

" Oh, Leo, how clever of you ! " Joyce gasped. " I wondered why you wanted me to keep that fire going——" She broke off. " But, look ! "

The others did not need that injunction. For now the Japs, in their dozens, were assembling on the beach. A cry went up as they spotted the Britishers, but at a word of command from their officers they all stood to attention, only their eyes fixed on the unarmed white people.

It seemed an eternity that the officer stood there, giving his instructions, but it was probably only a minute or two. The faces of Joy and the others were white and strained. Only Leo, of them all, stood there unmoved, his muscles tensed, his face calm and expectant.

" Leo—what can we do ? " Joyce cried, gripping his arm, for it was obvious that

the Jap officer had come to the end of his speech.

"Nothing. We just wait another moment," Leo replied calmly. "See!"

Even as he spoke a great cheer went up from the rest of the party, and Leo smiled. At the same moment the Japs were given the order to charge.

"Oh, hooray!" yelled Joy, dancing up and down in her excitement, not even glancing at the attacking enemy.

For as the Japs came running up the beach a great booming sound was heard, followed by the whine of a shell. The next moment the Japs went to earth, as a column of sand and stones shot up before them, accompanied by a great cloud of smoke.

And simultaneously, nosing its way round the cliff, came a warship, all guns belching, the white ensign flying.

"The Navy—the Royal Navy's here!" cried Captain Calvert. "We are saved again!"

. . . . .

Before the cornered Japanese could recover from the first shock, British sailors landed, and very soon all the enemy had been rounded up. Thankfully Joy & Co. re-boarded their ship, and that afternoon the voyage to Australia was resumed, though this time they had the escort of a stalwart British man-o'-war.

In the stern of the steamer stood Joy and Ken, and with them was Leo.

The jungle boy had discarded the animal skin he had worn on the island, and was now wearing a pair of Ken's linen shorts.

At his feet was sprawled out his pet jaguar, with amber eyes fixed adoringly on its master.

Joy stooped and stroked the magnificent head behind the ears.

"Chaka seems to like me," she smiled, as the great animal moved its head languidly and gave a rumbling purr.

"Everyone should like Joy, because she is good and brave and beautiful," Leo said simply.

"I wasn't really fishing for a compliment," Joy laughed, though she flushed with pleasure all the same.

For a little while longer the three stood there, saying nothing. It was Joy who broke the silence again.

"Leo, you are happy to leave your island home?"

"I am happy," Leo assented simply. "I want not my island home while my country fights, for my country may have need of me. I am happy, too, because you are my friend, Joy, and you have promised to look after me until once again I have learned your ways."

"And not only am I your friend," Joy declared. "Everybody on board this boat is your friend, too, Leo."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Ken, and he clapped the jungle boy cheerily on the back.

The PET She Kept in Secret

Vicky White knew it would be risking expulsion to defy the Headmistress, yet she would not part with her pet—for only the mischievous little spaniel could help her to discover their secret enemy.

By
AUDREY NICHOLLS

CHAPTER I

THE HEADMISTRESS IS ANNOYED

"OH, Vicky, what a clever dog!"

"Where did you get him?"

"Make him do that trick again!"

As the imploring shouts rang out, Vicky White, of Middle School "B" at Longbridge, gazed proudly at her silky, grey-and-white little spaniel.

It was rather late on the second day of the new term at Longbridge and Vicky, since she had come all the way from distant London, was one of the latest arrivals. But this time Vicky, who had never possessed a pet before, had brought with her a real surprise. The surprise was gazing up at her with expectant brown eyes.

"Now, Roan, get ready," she ordered. "I want you to do that trick again. Come on, there's a dear—salute!"

The dozen girls gathered round the Pets' Enclosure set up a delicious shriek as the spaniel, rearing himself on his hind-quarters, solemnly raised one paw, placed it against the side of his muzzle, and deliberately winked.

"Oh, tops," Peggy Mardell applauded "But, Vicky, where did you get him?"

" Bought him during the hols—at a dogs' home in London," Vicky laughed, and fondly patted her pet. " He's a dear, isn't he ? "

" Jolly clever," Alice Martin enthused. " Vicky, are you going to put him in the Squire's Pets' Show ? "

" Well, what do you think ? " Vicky countered. " Of course he's going in the Pets' Show—in the Clever Dogs' Class. Now let me show you his dice trick," she said, and fished a dice from her pocket. " Now Roan," she added, bending down and placing the dice in front of him, and then turned her head as another girl appeared on the scene—a tall, rather sallow-faced, scowling girl. " Hello, Sybil, come and watch the fun."

Sybil Stacey, the new arrival, halted. For a moment her eyes flickered as she saw the dog ; then a startled expression crossed her face. In that rather metallic voice she possessed she sharply enquired :

" Vicky, is that dog yours ? "

" Why, yes," Vicky answered, mildly astonished by the harshness of the other's voice. " I bought him at the Southriver Home——"

" What ? In London ? "

" Where else ? " Vicky answered good-humouredly. " And isn't he just the cleverest thing ! I've already entered him in the Clever Dogs' Class of the Squire's show," she added proudly.

Sybil stared at her. She did not look interested ; but then, Sybil never did. Sybil, the sneak of the Middle School, was no fonder of dogs than she was of her form-fellows.

" And, I suppose," she sneered, " you think he'll win first prize ? "

" Well, I don't know about that," Vicky answered, " but I do think he ought to get some sort of a prize. Anyway," she added pointedly, " I don't see why you should be jealous. You're not showing in the Squire's Show, are you ? "

" No, thank goodness," Sybil said, but again her eyes were fixed on the spaniel. " Why do you call him Roan ? " she asked.

" Because, silly, he's roan in colour," Vicky replied. " Now let's get on with the entertainment. We—Roan ! " she shrieked.

For her pet, having glimpsed a tabby cat stalking across the quad, had given an excited look and set off in hot pursuit.

" Roan—come back at once ! " Vicky gasped, dismayed, as she saw that the tabby was Minnie, the headmistress' own pet.

But for once Roan did not obey. Barking, he continued the chase. Through a gap in the hedge that separated the quad from the Head's private garden pursued and pursuer plunged, and in consternation Vicky and the other girls followed.

" My hat, if Miss Charter happens to spot him chasing her cat——" Phil Mayers gasped. " Vicky, quickly ! Round by the gate ! "

No need to advise Vicky, whose heart, by this time, was in her mouth. Towards the little gate indicated she dashed. But even as she reached it there came a fierce spitting noise, a shrill and excited yelp, followed by a startled exclamation in a human voice.

" Corks, that's the Head," Vicky cried, and stared in horror. For before her was Miss Charter, half-collapsed in the deck chair in which she had been relaxing, her sun hat awry on her head, her sun glasses perched on the tip of her nose. On her knees, a spitting arch of defiance and fury, was Minnie. On the grass at her feet, intending to do nothing about anything except to proclaim that he had cornered his enemy, was Roan, barking with lusty triumph.

" Roan," Vicky gasped, as she ran forward. " Roan, you bad dog ! "

" Yowlp ! " Roan said challengingly—not to Vicky, but to the cat.

And then, rather fiercely, Miss Charter came to her senses.

Furiously she jammed her hat on her head, almost viciously she adjusted her glasses. Then, tucking the spitting Minnie under her arm, as if she had been some furry handbag, she rose to her feet. She flung a quelling look at Roan, who instinctively shrunk back. Then she glared at Vicky.

" Vicky," she cried, " does this—this animal belong to you ? "

" Miss Charter, I'm sorry ! " Vicky gasped.

" My girl, you may be—but you will be sorrier if you do not keep that animal under control——"

" He—he saw the cat," Vicky stuttered feebly.

" My cat ! " the Head said sternly. " Dear Minnie—your wretched dog has given her the fright of her life ! "

" I—I'm sorry," was all Vicky could stumblingly find to say.

" No doubt," Miss Charter said acidly. " But you know the rules for pet owners, Vicky. You have a kennel for him, have you not ? You know as well as I do that dogs are not allowed within the school precincts unless attached to a lead. The animal is obviously young and therefore full of uncontrolled high spirits. If you cannot keep him in order he will have to go."

" Y-yes, Miss Charter," Vicky gasped, grabbing her pet by the collar.

" In the meantime," Miss Charter finished, " take fifty lines. Furthermore, take my warning to heart. Now go ! "

Vicky did not wait for the invitation to be repeated. Still tugging her pet, she trailed back towards the gates.

" Corks, what happened ? " Phil Mayer enquired.

" Lecture," Vicky said laconically. " Golly though, Miss Charter was in a fearful wax. Threatened to expel Roan if he broke loose again. But never mind ! I got off with fifty lines ! And now, young fellow-me-lad," she severely scolded the now penitent Roan, " you're going into your kennel ! "

And into his kennel Roan forthwith went. Then Vicky went to accept Phil's invitation to tea in her study.

" Well, I must say," Phil chuckled, " that Roan has celebrated his entry into Longbridge. But for goodness' sake do

" Oh, golly, how did you get here ? " gasped Vicky, as her forbidden pet jumped on to the bed. As she made to seize him the door opened and a stern figure entered the dormitory. It was the Headmistress !

keep an eye on him. The little chap is full of fun, and it would be too bad to get him turfed out. And," she added cautiously, " keep an eye on Sybil. She didn't look a bit pleased at seeing him."

Vicky laughed. She had no fear of Sybil. If Sybil had never been a friend of hers she had never been an active enemy and it was difficult to imagine her going out of her way to create trouble for Roan, especially as, having no rival pet, her own interests could not possibly be affected.

Or so, at least, Vicky thought at that moment. Before that meal was over she began to wonder.

For suddenly there came a terrific yelling from Sybil's study, followed by a shriek in Sybil's own voice. Down at once went Vicky's cup. Out she and Phil Mayer and Peggy Mardell dashed. In less than a minute they had reached Sybil's study, and Vicky gasped at the sight which met her gaze.

For there was Roan, now firmly tied by his lead to the table leg. And there was Sybil, utterly furious, scolding him. Beneath one of the windows was a bundle of torn curtain.

" Well, thank goodness you've come," Sybil cried, seeing her. " Look at that curtain—your wretched dog did that! Why didn't you tie him up ! "

" I did tie him up," Vicky retorted indignantly.

" Then how did he get here ? "

" I don't know—unless somebody let him off——" Vicky paused, hardly convincing herself by that argument. " Anyway, why should he come to your study and not to mine ? "

" And why," broke in an exasperated voice, " should the dog be in the school at all ? Really, Vicky ! " And Vicky, spinning in dismay, gulped as she saw Miss Charter. " Goodness gracious, look at that curtain ! " the headmistress cried. " Sybil, did the dog do that ? "

" Yes, Miss Charter, I came in and found him worrying it," Sybil said.

Vicky bit her lips. The Head's eyes glistened.

" Vicky, take that animal away," she said. " I have warned you once. I warn you again—and this, my girl, is the very last time. Either that dog is kept under proper control or he leaves the school. Now take him to the kennels."

" But, Miss Charter, I'm sure——"

" Please take him," the headmistress said testily. " And you may expect the value of the curtain to be deducted from your pocket-money."

Vicky bit her lip as she unleashed her pet. Some of that eager, hopeful enthusiasm with which she had looked forward to having a pet at the school was beginning to evaporate now. She just couldn't understand this. Although she had possessed Roan only a few weeks, he had shown himself such an obedient little chap that this sudden bout of mischief was beyond her understanding. What had happened to Roan ?

" Roan, you really will have to behave yourself," she told him, as she re-secured him to his kennel.

Roan looked at her with hurt reproach in his brown eyes. Though Vicky was in a mood to be cross, she just had to pat his silky head before leaving him.

" Oh, he—he'll soon settle down," she confidently consoled herself. " After all, it must be a bit strange for him."

That self-given prophecy seemed to be justified during the next twenty-four hours. Roan was on his best behaviour, and Vicky's enthusiasm returned in full as she thought of the not-far distant time when she would proudly exhibit her pet at Squire Manston's show—Squire Manston being a governor of the school who had made the show a yearly event.

After grooming next morning, Roan certainly did look splendid, and after his afternoon scamper in the woods before tea he looked as fit as a dog could possibly look, as he trotted obediently at her side. Then suddenly he ran off at a tangent once more.

" Roan," Vichy called.

But Roan was only chasing a scrap of paper which had blown across his path. His jaws snapped upon it in mid air, and at his mistress' call he came running back, proudly wagging his tail as if to tell her that he had brought her a present.

" Well, what have you found ? " Vicky asked him.

She took the slip of paper from him, glanced at it, then gave a start.

For the slip was the fragment of a letter written in a purple-tinted ink—a letter which had obviously been torn into pieces before being scattered. But it was the wording which caused Vicky to start. The slip contained the fragments of two lines, and they read :

"—Vicky White's dog. If he comes in contact—

"—dog spells danger. Meet you to-morrow at—"

In mystified amazement Vicky read the scrap again. What did it mean ? Who had sent it—and to whom ? But definitely the scrap referred to Roan. Had Roan, then, some secret enemy ?

Frowning, she put the fragment into her pocket. Then she returned to the school. All that evening she puzzled over the scrap, without, however, arriving at any satisfactory conclusion. She was still puzzling over it when she went to bed and eventually fell asleep, only to be awakened by a sudden weight jumping on her bed and a warm, moist tongue licking her face.

" Roan," she gasped. " Oh, golly, how did you get here ? "

" Woof ! " joyfully yelped Roan, wriggling his whole body. " Woof ! "

In a moment Vicky was out of bed. Frantically she plunged for the light, Roan frisking at her heels. Several other girls woke up as the light went on.

" Great Scott, Vicky, how did that animal get here ? "

" Get him out of sight——"

" Yowlp ! " Roan whooped joyfully, and picking up a slipper, jumped on Sybil's bed, there to worry the slipper in excited delight. Vicky dived for her frolicsome pet, and at that moment the door was thrown open.

" Vicky ! " cried a stern voice. "Vicky ! That dog again—how dare you ! " Miss Charter strode into the room. " Vicky, this is the very last warning ! I will not have the school turned into a bear garden because of your wretched pet ! To-morrow he leaves Longridge—for good ! "

CHAPTER II

SYBIL'S TREACHERY

In vain Vicky protested ; in vain she pleaded. Miss Charter was adamant. Roan must go !

The matron was sent for and Roan was taken away. Sympathy from all sides showered on Vichy—from all sides, that is, except from Sybil, who said it was a jolly good job the dog was to go. And Vicky, unhappy, mutinous, and feeling that something was badly wrong somewhere, finally went to sleep again.

But she went with a firm resolve in her mind. Roan, she was sure now, had been deliberately released—the author of that scrap of paper was obviously at work. And if Roan went all her hopes of him winning a prize in the Clever Dogs' Show would be shattered.

" He's not going," she told herself. " Roan didn't get here on his own account, and I don't believe now that he escaped when he was found in Sybil's study. Roan is jolly well going to stay. And I," she fiercely resolved, " am going to prove his innocence."

Unshaken was that determination when she rose next morning, almost immediately to be summoned to Miss Charter's study. The headmistress' face was flinty when she addressed her.

" Vicky, you will take the dog to the station and there you will put it on the ten-thirty train for London, afterwards sending a telegram to your parents telling them to collect him. Here is the money for the fare and the wire. You are excused lessons until eleven-thirty."

" Thank you," Vicky said, white lipped.

She took the money which, of course, would be reclaimed from her parents at the end of the term as additional expenses, and went out. After breakfast she tripped along to the Enclosure. Then leading her pleased pet to the gates, she caught the bus to the station.

But she did not go to the station. She alighted at the next stop and took her pet for a long ramble through the woods.

Lessons were in full swing when she returned to the school ; nobody was about. Just to avoid any possible accident,

however, she crept back into the grounds by way of a gap in the hedge, and swiftly leading her pet to the old school observatory—never used now since all its equipment had been dismantled—she vanished into it. In one of the roomy store-rooms beneath the observatory she made her pet comfortable.

" And this is where you stay," she told him. " No, Roan, don't look at me like that. It's heartbreaking, but necessary, old boy. There's some plot against you, and until I've ferreted it out and restored you to favour, you'll just have to stay here in secret. But I'll be along this afternoon to sneak you out for training and exercise in the woods, and I'll come again to-night with rations. You know, old boy, that I just daren't be seen with them in broad daylight. Now be a good little doggie ! "

Roan, projecting his laughing tongue, wagged his tail.

Vicky bit her lip. It broke her heart to have to tie the little chap up, but she forced herself to do it. Then she went back into school.

Fortunately, Vicky was Games monitress for Middle School B that term, which meant that she was excused afternoon lessons half an hour earlier than the others, her duty being to see that everything was got ready for the evening's practices. That task, however, she executed during the dinner hour. As soon as she was dismissed, she rushed to Roan.

" Come on, old chappie, a scamper in the woods," she said.

" Woof ! " Roan replied with joyful understanding.

Without mishap they made their escape, and for the next half-hour they revelled in a joyous scamper. Then, just before " Dismiss," they returned.

For half an hour Vicky remained with her pet, feeding him with tit-bits which she had managed to smuggle out of the kitchen. She put him through his tricks, groomed him, and talked to him. By the time she was ready to leave Roan had sunk into contented slumber.

So far, so good. The first part of her programme was working splendidly. The night's trip, however, was a different matter, for it meant breaking bounds. But that thought had no terrors for Vicky, and somewhere about eleven o'clock she climbed through the Reading Room window and made her way across the dark grounds. Roan, who seemed to sense now that silence was his cue, did not bark as she greeted him, but merely frisked around her feet.

" Dear old lad," Vicky breathed. " Look at the lovely grubbins I've brought for you ! "

She laughed as she arranged the food before him. Then, after filling a bowl of water from the still-active observatory tap, she gave him a last pat and stole out again. It seemed darker now.

Silently she slipped across the grounds, hugging the shrubbery just in case someone should be on the prowl. And then, suddenly ahead of her, she heard the mutter of voices. Abruptly Vicky pulled herself to a halt.

Who was out at this hour ?

She strained her eyes. The voices went on. Then, faintly, she began to make out things—the blurred trees, the black background which was the school itself, two dim figures, one short, the other tall—the figure of a girl. Unexpectedly, words reached her ears.

" So you see—the position is perilous ——" It was a youth's nervous voice talking to the girl. " Only the dog knows where the brown suede bag is——"

The very word " dog " made Vicky tense.

What was this ?

" Well, there's no need to worry," came the girl's voice. " I've seen to that."

" You mean," the youth said, " it won't appear in the show ? "

" Nor in anything else. The dog was sent home this morning."

Vicky almost cried out at those words. They were talking about her dog—her Roan !

She strained eyes and ears. But again the voices died to a mutter. Here, at last, were the people who were conspiring to injure Roan—because, apparently, they

wanted to keep him out of the show. Why?

She listened, hoping to hear more. But the darkness, aided by a rising mist, was now impenetrable. Cautiously, feeling that she must know their identity, she felt her way along the bushes. But when she reached the spot at which she judged the figures had been conversing they were no longer there.

"Gone," muttered Vicky in vexation.

Gone, undoubtedly, they had. And seeing no useful purpose could be served in searching the misty blackness, she groped her way back to the dormitory. Slowly, thoughtfully, she undressed, more convinced than ever now that a deliberate plot had been hatched against her pet.

In the morning she was awakened by Phil.

"Show a leg, lazy," she teased. "Have you forgotten that you and me are on waste-paper salvage this morning?"

"Oh!" Vicky said with a laugh; and slipped out of bed. For a moment she had forgotten that duty—a duty taken in turns by all Middle B girls—that of collecting waste paper from study and class-room baskets. "Be with you in five minutes," she said cheerily.

She was ready before that. Together she and Phyllis, each arming themselves with a sack, set off on their quest.

"Right-ho; you take the right side of the corridor, I'll take the left," Phil directed. "Bags I beat you."

Vicky laughed. She plunged into Study One. Very little salvage there; she went into Number Three. Here an almost full basket awaited her, and with dimpling pleasure she poured the waste into her bag. Then she entered Study Five.

That was Sybil's study. There was half a basket full of waste to be salvaged. Cheerfully Vicky grabbed it up. Shooting it into the sack, she paused as a discarded envelope fluttered beneath her eyes.

"Hello, what's this?" she exclaimed.

She hardly knew what had attracted her attention to that envelope until she had retrieved it. It was an empty envelope, inscribed with Sybil's name and address. But that name and address——

"Gosh, it's written in the same hand and the same ink as that torn scrap Roan found," Vicky breathed.

A minute's study convinced her of that. She began to tingle now. She had sudden mental pictures—that peculiar expression on Sybil's face when she had first introduced Roan; Sybil condemning Roan for having torn her study curtain. Then Sybil was the girl she had seen last night! Sybil was one of her secret enemies!

"Gosh!" Vicky breathed.

What should she do about it? Tackle Sybil? An instant's reflection banished that suggestion from her mind. After all, what supportable proof had she? Sybil could so easily deny everything.

"Best thing," Vicky decided, "is to watch Sybil. Meantime, of course, nobody

Vicky stared in amazement at the torn piece of paper the spaniel had been playing with. On it was a startling message—a message which suggested that her pet had a secret enemy!

must know that Roan is in the school observatory."

From that moment she carried out that purpose. In the intervals she paid secret visits to Roan. It did not occur to her that Sybil might also be keeping an eye on her.

Tuesday came and went. So did Wednesday. Nobody seemed to guess her secret, and Vicky made up her mind. Whatever happened Roan should compete in the Squire's Show on Saturday.

Thursday came. Roan was in high spirits Vicky gave him an extra careful grooming that day before contentedly returning to the Common Room. As she came in, Sybil met her.

" Hello, where have you been? " she asked.

" Oh, just doing duties," Vicky said airily. " Why ? Anybody want me ? "

Sybil was still staring—hard ; suspiciously.

" And your duty, I suppose, is grooming dogs ? "

Vicky started.

" Why do you say that ? "

" Well, look at the hairs on you——"

Vicky started again as, in dismay, she glanced down at her blazer.

" Where did you get those ? " Sybil enquired with sharp suspicion.

" Where ? Vicky shrugged " Well, if I haven't got a dog, I've still got a right to go into the Pets' Enclosure " she pointed out And whoever goes into the Enclosure without stroking the dogs ? It's no crime to carry a few dogs' hairs, is it ? "

" No, of course not," Alice Martin said. " What the dickens are you trying to drive at, Sybil ? "

Sybil turned away. Vicky drew a sigh of relief, though she chided herself for being careless Still, Sybil couldn't possibly guess the truth.

She would not have felt so confident the next afternoon if she had spotted the sneaking figure which trailed her to the observatory Her heart was bounding with joy, with hope. To-morrow was the great day To-morrow was the Pets' Show day and—golly !—what a surprise there was going to be for Sybil and the whole school when Roan, in spite of all, turned up once more.

" And you'll win, won't you, old boy ? " she asked, when she left him.

Roan, rearing himself on his hind legs, looked at her out of a pair of trustful brown eyes and saluted.

Vicky laughed as she departed. Back she went to the Common Room. But as she pushed open the door, she paused. For among the girls clustered in the room was Miss Charter.

" Ah, Vicky," she said, " come in, please. I am just trying to find out how many girls are going to the Pets' Show to-morrow so that I can arrange the necessary transport. I know you have no dog but I presume you wish to go ? "

" Oh, yes, please. I'm looking forward to it ever so," Vicky answered.

" I trust," Miss Charter said mildly, as if wishing to minimise the disappointment she felt Vicky must be experiencing as the result of losing her pet, " that your dog reached home safely ? "

" Roan is—is very happy, thank you, Miss Charters," she said.

" But not at home, eh, Vicky White ? " Sybil cried, entering at that moment. " Tell Miss Charter where he really is ! "

" Wnat ? " Miss Charter cried in surprise.

" Go on," taunted Sybil. " Tell Miss Charter what you were doing ten minutes ago ! Tell her," she added, making a dive for Vicky's blazer and snatching a comb and brush from the pocket, " what you have been using these for ! "

In startled amazement the girls eyed her. Miss Charter's face was suddenly as dark as a thundercloud.

" Vicky, explain——"

" Well," stumbled Vicky. " Well, you see. I—I'm rather fond of dogs, and so——" Then she froze as there came a sudden cheerful yelp from outside. " Oh, goodness ! " she gasped faintly. " Roan ! "

The next moment Roan, full of joyous glee, came bounding into the room.

CHAPTER III

ROAN SHOULD HAVE HIS CHANCE !

" THAT dog ! Seize it ! " Miss Charter ordered sternly. " Vicky, you impudent, disobedient girl, how dare you ? You never sent him away at all ! "

"She's had him in the observatory!" Sybil cried. "She——"

Vicky's stunned dismay now turned into raging indignation.

"You—you mean sneak!" she panted. "So it's you! You've been spying on me! You let Roan out! You——!"

"Vicky!"

"Well, it's true!" Vicky blazed. "She's trying to disgrace the dog because she doesn't want him in the show——"

"Which," Miss Charter said acidly, "is a foolish statement seeing that he certainly will not be in the show. And Vicky, don't dare to try to cover your own crimes by piling baseless accusations upon someone else. Alice, please take that dog to the lodgekeeper and tell him to keep it under careful control until to-morrow, when he will despatch it to London. As for you, Vicky," her lips compressed, "instead of going to the Pets' Show to-morrow you will spend the whole day in the class-room doing a special detention task."

Hard-eyed, Vicky stared at her. Murmurs of sympathy went up, but sympathy was of no use to her now. At the eleventh hour all her hopes were ruined; all her schemes undone. Sybil, in the end, had been too clever for her!

The Form, of course, upbraided Sybil for her sneaking—but of what comfort was that to Vicky? Sybil, her own ends achieved, did not mind—in fact, Sybil was the most cheerful girl in the Form when it went to bed that night. But Vicky went with a heart filled with utter despondency. What price now all her daring hopes?

Less cheerful than ever she felt when, next morning, she watched her festive friends depart, bound for Manston Manor, where the Dog Show was to be held. She almost choked when a prefect tapped her on the shoulder.

"Sorry, Vicky, but you know you're in detention," she said. "Class-room, please."

Unhappily, Vicky trailed off to the class-room. There her task was set. The prefect, waiting only until she had settled down, went out.

But Vicky sat gnawing her pen, alternately gazing at the bright sunshine outside and at the paper in front of her.

The day of the show! The day when she had hoped to bowl out Roan's enemies and score her great triumph! Instead of that she had been bowled out; her enemies had triumphed!

Vicky bit her lip. Oh, it was hateful, hateful! A fierce burning sense of mutiny suddenly swept her. It wasn't fair that Roan should be robbed of his chance! Then, glancing towards the lodge, she saw Grange, the lodgekeeper, come out dressed in his best clothes; she saw him amble across to the Enclosure, to emerge shortly afterwards with a dejected-looking Roan trailing at the end of a lead. Something seemed to burst within Vicky then.

Roan was being taken to the station—her cheated, maligned Roan who had committed no greater crime than to obey his own instincts for freedom! Roan was to be robbed of his show!

But was he? Not if she knew it! In an instant, all tumultuous resolve, Vicky was on her feet. If she could only trick Grange; if she could only get hold of Roan—— A sudden daring idea leapt into her mind.

Dare she risk it—for Roan's sake?

But she knew she would risk it. She knew she must risk it! Yes; even if it meant expulsion.

Once more she gazed out of the window. Roan and Grange had disappeared into the lodge now. Swiftly she dashed out of the class-room and rushed up to the Head's study. Unheedingly she threw open the door, crossed the floor to the Head's buzzer, and flung open the speaking trap. Above the little plate which said "Lodge," she pressed the button.

In a moment Grange's rather astonished voice came floating back to her through the loud-speaker.

"Yes, ma'am? I thought you had gone to the show——"

"How could I have gone to the show when I am here?" Vicky retorted, trusting to the metallic transmission of the instrument to disguise her voice. "Hurry, Grange. I want you——"

"Yes, ma'am. But this dog——"

" Leave the dog. Hurry, please."

" Yes, ma'am," Grange said bewilderedly.

Vicky grinned as she closed the trap. She glanced through the window. Grange, without Roan, was emerging from his lodge. Vicky smiled and then, glancing at the school clock, knew a swift, alarming qualm.

Half-past ten, and Roan's class was due to be judged at eleven !

Oh, goodness ! Could—could they reach the Manor in time ?

She thought no more. As Grange came ambling on, she hurried out. She met the lodgekeeper in the hall and he, without a suspicion that his summons had come from the girl who breathlessly flew past him, grumblingly ascended the stairs. Two minutes later Vicky hurled herself into the lodge where Roan, tied to the handle of the oven door, set up a joyful eager yelp as he saw her.

" Roan," Vicky almost sobbed, and snatched at the lead. " Roan, come on, old chap. I—I think we've just got time to do it !

. . . . . .

" WELL, thank you, girls ; an excellent show, I'm sure," big, genial Squire Manston beamed. " Now, will all competitors showing in the Clever Dogs' Class line up, please ? "

On the green lawn of Manston Manor there was buzzing animation. The great Pets' Show was going with a swing. Half the classes had already been judged, but the Clever Dogs' Class was the most exciting of them all.

" Poor Vicky," Phil murmured. " I'm sure that Roan of hers would have got first prize here. I'll bet she's eating her heart out."

" And no thanks," Alice Martin scowled at the near-by Sybil, " to that awful sneak. Sybil, aren't you ashamed of yourself ? "

Sybil smiled serenely. She glanced at the Squire, who was just handing over the list to his young secretary. The secretary's name was Sidney Stacey and, although he was not well known to the girls of Longbridge, he was Sybil's own brother.

He grinned slyly at Sybil as she sidled up.

" O.K. Get over this and I'm through," he said. " I've been in a blue funk in case that dog turned up after all, but it looks as if the danger point is passed now. It was a good stroke of work of yours, Sybil, finding that the Vicky girl was still hiding him."

" And an even better stroke of work," Sybil laughed, " getting the dog packed off again. I expect it's on its way to London now."

The secretary smirked again. Now, with the competitors lined up in front of him, he began to call out names.

" Agnes Brown, Beryl Davies——"

" Here," those two girls answered cheerfully.

Silkily Stacey smiled. Calling out name after name, he cheerfully went on. Then he paused.

" Vicky White——"

No reply.

" Isn't Miss White here ? " he asked in pretended surprise, and looked at the clock. " The judging takes place in two minutes time. She knows, surely, that her entry is automatically scratched if she is not here to report——"

" She will not be here to report," Miss Charter said stiffly. " She is detained. Please cross her name off the list."

" Please do nothing of the sort ! " cried a vibrant voice, and everybody, turning, stared and gasped as a bounding girl and a panting dog breathlessly dashed on to the scene. For a moment there was a stupified silence ; then a perfect howl went up.

" Vicky ! "

" Roan ! "

" Eh, great stars ! " the Squire cried, his eyes suddenly on the dog. " That dog ! Hey, Rover ! " he called.

Roan, running, seemed to prick up his ears. Then he saw the Squire. A howl that was almost hysterical burst from his throat. The next instant he was gambolling forward, tearing the lead out of Vicky's hands.

" Roan ! " she shrieked.

But Roan, for once, was deaf. Roan was making straight for the Squire. Sidney Stacey, staring, gave an agitated cry, but

the Squire, his own face filled with joy, bent down as the delirious Roan hurled himself full at him. Vicky, meantime, had been caught by Miss Charter.

"Vicky, you bad, wicked girl," she cried. "Return with that animal at once——"

"Hey, what? No, wait a minute," the Squire cried. "I believe—I'm sure—this is *my* dog."

"What?" Miss Charter gasped.

"The dog," the Squire affirmed, "which I lost six months ago—my Rover. Don't you remember me telling you how he mysteriously disappeared at the time my safe was burgled and my rubies stolen? Miss White, would you mind telling me where you got this dog?"

"Tell Miss Charter what you were doing ten minutes ago!" cried Sybil. "Tell her," she added, making a dive at Vicky's blazer and snatching a brush and comb from the pocket, "what you have been using these for!"

"Why, yes," Vicky wonderingly replied, and in a few brief sentences gave him all she knew of Roan's history.

"But how did the dog get to London?" the Squire cried. "Did the burglars take him too? I—— Hello, hello!" he said, as Roan capered and barked frenziedly. "He wants to tell me something."

"I—I think, sir, that the dog is merely excited," Sidney Stacey put in. "Shall I remove him?"

"Egad, no! You don't know this dog. I do. What is it?" he asked, as Roan again caught the bottom of his trousers in his teeth and then ran a few paces towards the shrubbery. "I believe the dog wants to take me somewhere," the Squire said. "Is that it, Rover?"

"Yowlp!" Roan shrilled.

"Really, sir; the show!" Sidney gasped perspiringly.

"Let the show wait a minute," the Squire said. "There's no hurry. I'm going to see what this dog wants. Miss White, you come along, too, please."

Vicky did not miss the sudden fear-stricken look which passed between Sybil and her brother. She thrilled. For she knew now that she was coming to grips with the mystery.

"Roan, go on!" she cried eagerly.

With a joyful bark Roan galloped ahead. Into the shrubbery he disappeared, then suddenly he stopped. Eagerly he sniffed at the ground beneath a tall laurel, then frantically began to dig.

"Roan, what the dickens——" Vicky cried.

" Watch," the Squire chuckled. " I expect he wants to present me with his prize bone."

They stood still. A knot of girls had joined them now. They all stood around while Roan, digging with frenzied industry, sent the earth flying in all directions. Then, suddenly, a half-growl welled from his throat and down went his muzzle into the hole he had made. It came out, a small brown suede bag gripped in his teeth.

" Hello, what's this? " cried the surprised Squire, as Roan trotted towards him and solemnly dropped the bag at his feet. " By Jove, Sidney, this is your bag ! " he exclaimed, as he picked it up. " But what's in it ? "

A wondering, questioning silence fell. Sidney Stacey was shaking now. Too late he put forward a hand, as the Squire opened the bag.

Then the Squire jumped.

" My rubies—the rubies I thought had been burgled ! " he cried. " In your bag, Sidney ! Now, sir, how do you explain this ? "

Sidney, coward as he was, was trembling from head to foot.

" I—I'm sorry," he quavered. " I—I—the dog stole them from me ! "

" What ? Then you must have stolen them in the first place ! " The Squire stared. " Is that what you are telling me ? "

" N-no, of—of course not." Sidney burst out into cold perspiration. Then, seeing that the game was up, he broke down altogether. " I'm sorry," he muttered. " I did not mean——"

" Tell me the truth, sir, otherwise I send for the police at once."

At that the quivering rascal completely broke down. While everybody stood open-mouthed, his halting story came out. He told how he had faked the burglary so that it should appear the safe had been broken open, how he had stolen the rubies and put them into this bag. But, unfortunately, he had forgotten Roan. While his back was turned Roan had snatched up the bag and frisked off with it into the shrubbery. From that moment the bag had disappeared.

" You guessed he had hidden the rubies and in case he should unearth them at an inconvenient moment you took him to London and lost him," the Squire said. " Meantime, I suppose, you've been trying to find the hiding place yourself——"

Sidney nodded sullenly, while from Sybil went up a little moan.

" And meantime," Vicky chipped in, " Sybil tried to get Roan disgraced so that he would be banished from school—obviously because she knew the dog would recognise you if it came to the show——"

" Sybil, is this true ? " Miss Charter cried.

" Well, I—I had to help my brother," Sybil cried. " I——"

" You mean," the Squire said sternly, " that you were an accomplice in this robbery. But worse than that, you tried to get this girl and her pet into trouble. Get out of my sight, both of you." And as the pair, perhaps glad to get off so cheaply, slunk away, he turned to Vicky. " Miss White, I am grateful," he said. " I hardly know how to thank you. If—if there is anything I can do for you——"

Vicky gulped.

" Yes, please, there is, sir. Let—let me keep Roan."

The Squire frowned, then he smiled.

" It's a bargain," he declared. " After all, I suppose, in a sense he is your property—and he'll still be near me if he's kept at school. Very well, Miss White, he is yours, and just to show what I think of your pet I'm going to add a special medal here and now to the awards in this show—a medal for the most intelligent dog. I think you'll agree, girls, that Miss White's Roan has earned that all along the line ? "

They did. Loud applause greeted the suggestion. The applause was even louder half an hour later when, the judging over, it was announced that Roan had also won first prize in the Clever Dog's Class.

THE END

By
DAPHNE
GRAYSON

SALLY and The GIRL STOWAWAY

An enthralling story featuring ever-popular Sally Warner and Co. in those carefree days when luxury cruising was all the rage.

CHAPTER I

THE CAKES THAT VANISHED

"AIM for the one—whoops, another roll! —and then you'll get the nine!" Sally Warner sang out gaily.

Her friend, Fay Manners, nodded her thanks for the suggestion.

"I will. Here goes!" she exclaimed, tossing the rope ring. "There, missed!"

"Tough!" Don Weston sympathised.

"Rough!" Sally chuckled.

Don was referring to Fay's failure to score at deck quoits. Sally's remark concerned the sea.

Rough it was certainly becoming, though overhead the sun shone down brilliantly from a blue sky.

In the circumstances, therefore, the first round of a deck quoits competition in which Sally and her friends on the liner s.s. Dorian were taking part was being played under a handicap. Even their most carefully aimed throws were several degrees out as the liner plunged and rolled in a manner that had already proved too "bracing" for many of the passengers.

"Here are we trying to play quoits and the sea's making us play pitch and toss instead," Sally brightly observed. "Have to give up if it becomes any rougher."

"Rough?" Johnny Briggs, standing beside her, gave a scornful laugh. "I don't call this rough. Just a swell, perhaps—— My hat! Help!" He went shooting forward as the liner gave another roll, and just saved himself from sprawling to the deck by grabbing hold of one of the davits of the near-by lifeboat.

" Only a swell, of course," Sally murmured, eyes twinkling.

" Well, maybe it's a little choppy," Johnny admitted. " But that's how I like it. I'm a good sailor," he added in that boastful way of his. " Never been ill yet and I've known some bad crossings, I can tell you."

" Wouldn't be you if you didn't tell us," Don chuckled. " But come on, old man. Your throw now."

Johnny, however, did not move—no more, that is, than the pitching of the ship made him move. A startled expression suddenly came into his face.

" Corks ! " he muttered.

" That reminds me," Sally grinned. " Who says one of these pastries ? Thought the excitement might make us peckish. Bet you a cream bun you don't get a nine, Johnny," she went on, picking up a dish of pastries from off one of the deck-chairs.

" Cream bun—grooh ! " Johnny Briggs groaned, and hastily averted his gaze as Sally flourished the dish.

" But I thought you liked cream buns ——"

" I do—but I don't—take them away ! Grooh ! " Johnny groaned again.

Don stared. Then he looked sympathetic.

" Hallo, what's the matter ? If you're feeling seedy, old chap——"

" Seedy ? Of course not ! Crumbs ! " But Johnny's sudden change of colour, and yet another groan, belied his words. " I—I say, I think I'll have to pop below. Forgotten something, you know——"

Johnny said no more. With a sudden rush he went staggering off along the deck and abruptly vanished from view down a companionway.

" Poor old Johnny ! " Sally murmured. " Think he'll be all right, Don ? "

" Of course. I'll go down and see him later on. Must say I'm not keen on looking those cream buns in the face myself," Don said with a grimace.

" I'm going to have one," Sally declared recklessly ; then, exercising a girl's privilege, changed her mind. " Hem ! Think I'll be content with one of the plainer sort."

She had placed the dish on a ledge near the lifeboat. Now, while her friends continued the game of deck quoits, she surveyed the cakes. There had been a sponge one which looked safe enough.

But then Sally blinked. The sponge one wasn't there. Yet she was certain she hadn't seen anyone take it.

" My mistake, though," she grinned. " Oh, well, this slice of cherry cake will go nicely."

Before she could take even a bite, however, Fay called across to say that it was her turn to throw.

Sally put down the slice of cake, took the proffered quoit and aimed. Next moment there was a yell from Don.

" Hey, there, Sally, my nose isn't the board ! "

" Ha, ha, ha ! "

" Sorry," Sally chuckled. " But I say, shipmates, it is hopeless, isn't it—this game, I mean, not Don's nose ! "

" Just let me have my throw to finish off the round, and then perhaps we'd better pack up," Don agreed.

Sally turned to get her piece of cake. Then again her eyes widened in surprise.

" Gone ! " she gasped. " My hat, am I seeing things ? But I can't see it—that's the point. Look here, who's taken——"

Abruptly Sally broke off. For, looking up from the dish, she was just in time to catch a glimpse of a slim hand quickly disappearing under the waterproof covering of the lifeboat. And grasped in that hand was the missing piece of cherry cake !

" Oh-ho ! " Sally murmured. " So that's the explanation of the giddy mystery, is it ? And I'll wager a tiddler to a whale that's where the sponge cake went too ! "

She strode up to the lifeboat.

" The game's up ! " she exclaimed melodramatically. " Come on, show yourself——"

And then Sally received a shock.

" Don't ! " hissed a frantic voice from inside the boat. " Please don't give me away—please ! Don't let anybody know I'm here ! "

Sally gasped, her mouth dropping open in amazement. It was a girl's voice she had heard. And then, even as she stood

there, rigid and dumbfounded, Don came across.

" You're right, Sally," he said. " We'll have to give up. No good carrying on with the ship pitching about like this." He stared at her. " I say, you're looking queer. Not going under the weather, are you ? "

" Nun-no," Sally stammered, " of course not, Don ! I'm all right ! "

" Good ! " Don looked relieved. " Come on, let's go down below. It's nearly time for dinner, anyway—and after that there's the jolly old dance. My hat, we'll have some fun trying to jig round in this ! "

He and the others moved off towards the nearest companionway. Sally pretended to follow but then quickly retraced her steps.

She felt a queer little thrill run through her. Who was the girl concealed in the lifeboat ?

" All clear ! " Sally whispered as she drew alongside the boat. " No one about. I say, what's the merry idea ? "

The tarpaulin moved, and then a head appeared cautiously in view. Sally found herself staring at a pale but pretty face —the face of a girl slightly older than herself.

" You—you haven't told anyone I'm hiding here ? " the girl gasped.

" No." Sally shook her head. " But who are you ? Why hide here, anyway ? "

" I—I'm a stowaway ! "

" Golly ! " Sally looked startled.

" I—I had to do it," the girl went on. " Oh, please don't give me away ! You see, I had my ticket stolen."

" Yes, but——" For once Sally was at a loss for words.

" I'll tell you everything," the girl continued. " My name's Tessa Lawley. I was going to join the ship at Santa Maria and travel as far as Puerto. Then I discovered my ticket had gone. I knew it must have been taken by someone who doesn't want me to reach Puerto by the Wednesday. But I must get there," Tessa went on fiercely. " I'm going to join some relatives who haven't seen me for years. My whole future happiness depends on my meeting them."

" I see," Sally said slowly.

" So that's why I smuggled myself on board and hid in this boat," Tessa added. " Oh, you do believe me, don't you ? "

" Yes." Sally had already made up her mind on that point. She liked the look of Tessa Lawley, too. " And if there's anything I can do to help——"

" You can—by keeping my secret."

" You know I will. But "—Sally looked anxious—" stowaways aren't exactly popular. You're running an awful risk, Tessa."

" Perhaps I am. But I've got to do it," Tessa said.

" Have you any food ? " Sally asked.

" No ; only those two cakes I took. I'm awfully sorry about that——"

" Forget it ! Although you did get me guessing. I thought the old Dorian was haunted or something." Sally chuckled. " Look here, I'll bring you along some grub—something more substantial than cakes."

" Oh, thank you ! "

" Sally Warner's the name, by the way. And you'll want some blankets, too."

" You're so kind, Sally."

" Only too pleased to help a shipmate in distress," Sally said. " I'll have to leave it till later—when it's getting dark. Less risk of being seen then. You can manage for an hour or two, Tessa ? "

" Oh, yes. And thank you again, Sally."

" Don't mensh again ! " Sally smiled. " All right—be seeing you. And mum's the word—you can rely on that."

With a grateful smile Tessa lowered the tarpaulin and vanished from view. Sally hurried on her way down to the promenade deck.

Her heart was beating a little faster than normal. Goodness, but she did see life ! Here she was actually helping a stowaway.

Down in her cabin, she changed for dinner. Then Fay joined her, and together they made their way along to the Dorian's dining-room. The vessel was still rolling badly—indeed, the sea was becoming more rough than ever—and there were many absentees among the ship's company for dinner that evening.

Johnny Briggs was one of them.

"But he'll be sitting up and taking nourishment to-morrow," Don said, in answer to Sally's inquiry on his behalf. "At least, he's boasting he will!"

Johnny was the only one missing from the crowd, and dinner was a jolly meal, even if eaten under difficulties.

Afterwards, they all took a breather up on the sheltered promenade deck. By now dusk was descending over the sea as the sun sank in a fiery ball behind heavy, ominous, black clouds.

"Dirty weather ahead!" Don proclaimed. "Going to need our best sea-legs. See you down in the ballroom, Sally?"

"In half an hour's time," Fay put in. "Sally's just coming along to my cabin——"

"You girls, and the way you titivate yourselves!" Don grinned. "But I must say you both look swell, as Johnny would put it," he added sincerely.

"Thank you, kind sir!" Fay laughed. "Ready, Sally?"

Sally started. She had been thinking of her promise to take food and blankets to Tessa.

"Do—do you mind if I just pop along to my own cabin first, Fay?" she asked, flushing a little. "Won't be long, you know."

"All right! I'll wait outside for you!" Fay said.

"No, don't do that! I'll come in for you," Sally said hastily, flushing again. "It—it's turning chilly—you don't want to catch cold."

And she hurried away, aware that Fay had given her a rather puzzled glance. Helping the stowaway wasn't going to be quite so easy as Sally had imagined.

She must take the food and blankets to Tessa now, however. Tessa would be needing them. She must be awfully hungry, and cold too.

Slipping into her cabin, Sally gathered up the food which she had already laid in and concealed beneath a couple of folded blankets taken from her bed.

"H'm! Going to look a bit fishy if I'm seen running around with these," Sally murmured and then smiled. "I know! I'll slip my bathing robe over them!"

Quickly she stepped out on to the deck, had taken half a dozen steps, when suddenly the door of the next cabin opened and out stepped the figure of a girl.

It was Linda Brett, the unpleasant occupant of Cabin No. 18 and the girl whom Sally had come up against when first she had joined the Dorian.

Linda scowled as she saw Sally.

"Oh, you, is it?" she snapped.

"Yes, little me," Sally replied shortly, and made to pass on.

"What's that you've got there?" Linda demanded rudely. "My hat, a bathing robe! Do you usually go swimming at this time of night—and when you're all dressed up for the dance?"

Then, before Sally could stop her, Linda grabbed at the robe and contemptuously flung it down to the deck.

CHAPTER II

A SEARCH OF THE LINER!

SALLY'S heart almost stood still. Linda's uncalled-for action had revealed the blankets; and she had very nearly caused Sally to drop the food which she was carrying under them.

If Linda had seen that——

Sally, angry though she was, realised that the sooner she got on her way the better.

Keeping a tight hold on the blankets, she stooped to pick up the robe. Linda was staring at her with narrowed eyes.

"Blankets as well!" she sneered. "Going to tuck yourself up on the deck in them after your swim, I suppose?"

"Any business of yours what I do?" Sally retorted.

"Well, when you do queer things like this, Sally Warner——"

"Rabbits!"

And Sally hurried on her way, conscious of the fact that Linda was gazing after her curiously.

She passed out of sight round a corridor and sped up to the deck above before Linda could have a chance to follow her.

A wind was blowing up, whistling in between the liner's funnels and superstructure. The deck was deserted, and

As Sally hurried along the deck a cabin door was flung open and Linda Brett emerged. "Hallo, what have you got there?" Linda asked, and she looked suspiciously at Sally's bundle.

Sally hurried across to the lifeboat in which the stowaway had concealed herself.

"You there, Tessa?" she whispered. "It's Sally."

Once more the tarpaulin moved, and once more Tessa Lawley's face appeared.

"Goods as promised," Sally said. "Tuck yourself up comfy, and eat as much of the food as you like. I'll bring you some more first thing to-morrow morning. Everything all right?"

"Yes—thanks to you, Sally!"

"Must go now. Might arouse suspicion if I'm away from the crowd too long. Good-bye, Tessa."

"Good-bye, Sally. You've been wonderful."

Sally sped downstairs again. How lonely it must be for Tessa there in the darkness of that boat, covered in by that tarpaulin; and how worrying, too, with the ever-present fear that she might be discovered, afraid to show herself.

Sally would have liked to stay with her, talked to her, but that would be clearly unwise. Linda, plainly puzzled and curious, might come snooping round.

Twenty minutes later, having joined Fay, Sally went down into the Dorian's domed ballroom.

Don, Ginger Calvin and Freddie Parker greeted the girls with delighted whoops.

"Claim first dance, Sally," Don cried. "And if I tread on your toes I shall blame the weather!"

Then they were gliding over the polished floor amid the other dancers.

Fay had Ginger as her partner, and Freddie—who was something of an expert—was teaching Muriel Dean some intricate fox-trot steps; they became even more intricate owing to the lurching of the ship.

The fox-trot came to an end and the band stopped playing.

" Thanks, Sally," Don beamed. " Jolly good ! I say, just listen to the wind outside ! There's a gale blowing up or I'm a Hottentot from Timbuctoo. But it's cosy enough down here, so who cares ? Can I have the next dance, Sally ? "

Sally nodded. But she was listening to the shriek of the wind, was noticing how the Dorian was rolling worse than ever.

And outside, on the windswept deck, Tessa Lawley would be huddled alone in that lifeboat. She'd be cold, miserable, perhaps frightened.

Oh, wasn't there somewhere else where Tessa could hide—somewhere more sheltered and cosy ?

In one of the cabins. Yes, that was an idea. Sally's eyes suddenly gleamed. In her cabin !

Could she smuggle Tessa into her cabin ? It should surely be easy. No one would be on the open deck on a night like this. Even those of the crew on duty would be in the more sheltered spots. She could do it. What's more, she would do it !

The band struck up again—a waltz this time.

" Come on, Sally," Don smiled.

" Sorry, but do you mind if we miss this one ? " Sally asked.

" But you said——"

" I know ! I won't be long—just want to pop along to my cabin," Sally explained hastily.

And before Don could say another word, she was hurrying from the ballroom, leaving the boy staring after her in bewilderment.

To her cabin she did go—just a swift look-in to slip on her coat. Then up one of the companions she made her way.

The promenade deck, enclosed in glass, was sheltered enough. But reaching the open deck, Sally was very nearly swept off her feet. The wind shrieked about her—cold, fierce gusts that took her breath away. She had to battle against it to reach the lifeboat. It hung there from its davits, swaying, slightly creaking.

" Tessa ! " Sally called above the howl of the wind.

Tessa's face appeared, and in the glow from a near-by deck light, Sally saw that it was white and strained, that the stowaway's teeth were chattering.

" Tessa, you can't stay here ! " Sally went on.

" This wind is awful, isn't it ? " Tessa said. " But where else can I go, Sally ? "

" Down to my cabin. No one will see you—no one need know."

" No, Sally. I'm a stowaway. I don't want you getting into trouble because of me."

" Bow-wow ! You're coming ! Shiver me tops'ls, but I shall get blown overboard ! " Sally gasped. " Buck up, Tessa ! "

Tessa, after a moment's hesitation, clambered out of the lifeboat. They stood there for an instant, clutching hold of each other as they looked up and down the wind-lashed deck.

" All clear ! Run for it ! " Sally cried. " Keep just behind me."

They met not a soul, and then Sally was opening the door of her cabin and pushing Tessa inside.

The stowaway, pale and trembling, sank limply into a chair.

" Sally, you're a brick ! " she said huskily. " I was terrified in that boat ——"

" I should say you were. But you're O.K. now, aren't you ? " Sally smiled. " Better make yourself as inconspicuous as possible in case anyone should come in. But if you hear three sharp raps on the door you'll know it's me. Now I suppose I'd better go back to the ballroom. Wish you could come and join in the fun, Tessa."

Tessa smiled wistfully.

" I would be able to if only I had my ticket," she said. " But don't let me spoil your enjoyment, Sally. I'll be lovely here, thanks. And as soon as the gale's died down I can slip back to the boat."

" We'll talk about that later," Sally said, a hazy idea in her brain that perhaps Tessa could remain here until the Dorian reached Puerto.

Then back once more she went to the ballroom. Don had just finished dancing

with Fay. He gave Sally a curious look, but then fresh excitement broke out when the M.C. announced that the next dance would be a Paul Jones.

" We want everybody in this," he said genially. " Gentlemen will form the inside ring. Come on, now—off we go ! "

The band struck up a lively six-eight while everybody jostled into the centre of the ballroom. Then round they went, the men one way, the girls the other. A cymbal crashed.

Sally found herself facing—Don.

" You can't dodge me, Sally," he grinned.

But even as the band began playing, Sally saw that an officer had come into the ballroom and was talking to Captain Carr. Then the captain went on to the stage, said something, and once again the drummer's cymbal crashed.

" Ladies and gentlemen," Captain Carr said, his voice a little grim. " I'm sorry to interrupt the merriment, but disturbing news has just been reported to me. Blankets and food have just been discovered in one of the lifeboats, which suggests there is a stowaway skulking on board."

Sally felt the colour drain from her face.

" The crew are now investigating all the holds and other likely places where this stowaway might be hiding," the captain continued. " If this proves unsuccessful, then I'm afraid I shall have to ask you all to allow your cabins to be searched. This is most unfortunate, but the stowaway must be found."

Captain Carr stepped down, and the band resumed playing. But Sally felt herself tremble. The cabins to be searched ! Her cabin to be searched !

" Sally, is there anything wrong ? "

She started, aware that Don was looking at her oddly.

" N-no ! " she stammered.

" Then shall we dance ? "

Sally bit her lip. Frantic thoughts were racing through her brain. She must warn Tessa. Somehow, she must hide her so that even if the cabin were searched she would not be found. Suddenly it dawned on Sally, too, that her own position was serious.

If it became known that she had helped a stowaway, there would be trouble. Captain Carr would be furious.

Something had got to be done—now, at once !

Dismayedly, she looked up at Don.

" Don, I'm dreadfully sorry, but I—I really must rush away ! " she faltered.

" Look here, Sally, you're being jolly queer to-night——" he began gruffly.

" That's what I think," broke in another voice, and there, standing beside them, was Linda, a suspicious, spiteful gleam in her eyes. " Found blankets in one of the lifeboats, did they ? A stowaway, eh ? It's funny I should see Sally here snooping around with some blankets just after dinner——"

" Don't be absurd, Linda ! How can Sally be a stowaway ? " Don broke in curtly.

" I'm not saying she is—of course not ! " Linda snapped. " But what I am suggesting is that perhaps she knows something——"

Sally didn't wait to hear any more. Taking to her heels, she flew from the ballroom and raced along to her cabin.

Tessa mustn't be found—for Tessa's sake as well as for her own !

She rushed into her cabin, forgetting the prearranged knock in her agitation.

There was a gasp from Tessa as she frantically plunged to the floor on the other side of the bed. She began scrambling up again as she saw it was Sally.

" No, stay there ! " Sally panted. " They're searching the cabins, Tessa. They've discovered there's a stowaway on board ! "

Tessa looked startled.

" Sally ! Then I must get out of here ! I'm not letting you——"

" We can work it ! " Sally cried. " Get right behind the bed. I'll drag this trunk close to you ! "

" But if they search the cabin——"

" I'll put them off somehow—there's no other hope," Sally said. " You'd be spotted the moment you left this cabin. Someone coming ! Quick—out of sight ! "

Two moments later there was a tap on the door. Sally opened it, found herself

looking into the apologetic face of one of the officers.

" Searching for the stowaway ? " Sally asked, striving to keep her voice calm. " I've just come in and looked myself. O.K. here ! "

The officer nodded, looked round the cabin quickly, then smiled.

" Thanks, Miss Warner ! "

He withdrew. Sally closed the door and stood leaning against it, fanning her cheeks.

" Phew ! " she gasped. " But it worked ! "

But anxiety filled her. For how long could she continue to keep Tessa hidden here—or anywhere on the boat, for that matter—without her being discovered ?

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WITH THE TICKET

TESSA remained hidden in the cabin all that night.

Early the following morning, with the force of the gale abated but a strong wind still blowing, with the Dorian still ploughing through heavy seas, Sally and Tessa discussed the situation.

Tessa wanted to leave, to take a chance of finding a new place of concealment, but Sally wouldn't hear of it.

" You'd be discovered," she said positively. " But here you're safe. No one suspects."

" But, Sally——"

" Listen, Tessa ! We can still work it, but I shall have to tell one of my friends. You're agreeable ? "

" I'm agreeable to anything you suggest, Sally," Tessa said huskily. " You're being so marvellous about everything——"

" I shall get swelled head if you go on throwing out all these compliments ! " Sally smiled. " But the idea is this—I've got to tell someone else because we shall have to take it in turns to make sure that no one enters the cabin."

" But what about the stewards——"

" Oh, we'll be able to get over that snag all right ! " Sally said confidently. " Now make yourself scarce again, Tessa, while I go and arouse old Fay. Still sleeping, I expect, but she'll wake up quick enough when I tell her I'm in the position to reveal the full sensational facts about the stowaway, as they would say in the newspapers."

Sally chuckled and went out.

And it was to Fay, because Fay had become her closest friend, and she knew she was to be trusted with the secret, that Sally did reveal what she had done.

Fay was more than startled—she was plainly apprehensive when she heard of her chum's reckless action. But after she had met Tessa she knew that she would have acted in the same way.

Sally's plan was put into operation. One or the other of them would always be near or inside the cabin, to stall off and keep away visitors.

And now that it was put into operation, Sally realised it would have to be of a temporary nature. They could never go through with it until the South American port of Puerto was reached without arousing suspicion by the fact that they, such close chums, had suddenly separated in their movements.

But the object at the moment was to stall off danger while the hue-and-cry for the stowaway was still at its height.

So Fay went down to breakfast alone, while Sally, in slacks and roll-collar pullover, strode up and down the deck, combining a brisk morning constitutional with a careful watch on her cabin, which she always kept in sight.

Sally's absence aroused comment among the crowd, but Fay managed to pass it over. She returned to rejoin her chum. Don, striding on to deck shortly afterwards, caught them together.

" Hallo, here you are, Sally ! Fay said you didn't feel like any breakfast," he greeted. " I was going to suggest carrying on with the quoits competition this morning. Feel up to it ? "

Sally exchanged a quick glance with Fay.

" Of course, Don. The boat's still pitching, but not quite so much."

" 'Fraid you'll have to count me out, though," Fay put in. " But it won't make much difference. I can play later. Off you go, Sally ! "

Don made no comment, but he was obviously puzzled.

Sally stared in consternation as the captain made his dramatic announcement. It was known that there was a stowaway on board, and all the cabins were to be searched. Did that mean that her fugitive friend would be found?

Sally, wondering how Fay was getting on, hoping desperately that Tessa would not be discovered, played erratically. The constant rolling of the Dorian did not help matters.

"Only nine points out of a possible twenty-seven that time, Sally," Don remarked, as the official scorer put down the figures on his card.

Again it came round to Sally's turn to throw. She took the first quoit, aimed for the nine peg, and threw. But even as her arm swept forward the boat gave a violent lurch, sending her off her balance.

Through the air skimmed the rope ring, yards away from the board, and hit a man who was standing in a near-by wind shelter as he was in the act of examining some papers which he had taken out from his pocket-wallet.

Papers and wallet, struck by the quoit, fell to the deck.

"Oh dear—sorry!" Sally gasped, running forward.

The man glared, his eyes glittering angrily.

"Can't you throw straight?" he demanded in a surly voice. "That ring might have hurt my face. You shouldn't be playing in this weather!"

"Sorry!" Sally said again. "An accident, you know."

She stooped to help the man retrieve the fallen papers. Then suddenly she went rigid, her eyes widened incredulously.

For her fingers had closed upon an envelope, the flap of which was open. And protruding from it was a steamship ticket similar in many respects to her own ticket. But it was not that which caused Sally's amazement.

It was a name printed on that ticket—Tessa Lawley's name!

A moment later the envelope was quickly snatched from her grasp. She heard the man give a grunt, saw the startled expression on his face.

"You needn't bother," he said curtly.

Ramming the envelope into his pocket, he turned on his heel and hurriedly strode away.

Sally stared after him, her brain whirling. Tessa's missing ticket—the ticket she said had been stolen from her! And this man had it in his possession!

"My hat!" Sally gasped. "He must have taken it! Golly, if I can only get hold of it——"

She broke off. Freddie Parker had suddenly come running along the deck, a look of excitement on his face.

"I say! What do you think?" he shouted. "They've got her!"

"Got who?" Don demanded.

"The stowaway—a girl! And she's just been found in one of the cabins—I heard an officer say so!"

Sally's heart gave a lurch, and wildly she made for the companion way, eager to find Fay and discover what had happened.

CHAPTER IV

SALLY'S DESPERATE RUSE

"SALLY, I'm awfully sorry!" Fay Manners gasped in dismay.

"What happened, Fay?" Sally asked.

"I left Tessa just for a few moments," Fay explained miserably. "I saw the stewardess go into my cabin, and went to tell her not to worry about cleaning out yours. When I came back I found an officer dragging out Tessa. But somebody must have given the game away, Sally!"

Sally nodded. Yes, that was obvious.

"Where is she now?"

"Been taken along to see the captain," Fay replied. "The officer said she was sure to be disembarked at the next port of call. Oh, Sally, what can we do?"

Sally's eyes gleamed.

"Do?" she cried. "I'm jolly well going to get her ticket back!"

"But—but——"

In a few brief words Sally told her chum of the incident on the sports deck.

"Get that, and everything will be all right!" Sally exclaimed excitedly.

"Where is this man?" Fay asked eagerly.

"That's what we've got to find out. Come on!"

But even as the two chums turned, a voice hailed them.

"Miss Warner!"

Sally swung round. Coming up to her was Mr. Davis, the purser.

" Miss Warner," he said again, " Captain Carr wants to see you."

Sally felt her heart beat faster. She didn't need to be told the reason for the captain's summons. He knew that she had helped to conceal the stowaway, and he wanted an explanation.

But if only she could get that ticket——

" Sorry ! Can't come now ! " she gasped. " But I'll be along in a few minutes——"

" You'll come along now, Miss Warner ! " the purser said grimly, laying a hand on Sally's arm.

Sally acted first, and thought afterwards. With a sudden wrench she dragged her arm free.

" Come along, Fay ! " she gasped, and tore off down the deck.

" Miss Warner, stop ! " the purser shouted angrily.

But Sally sped on, with the purser and another officer in pursuit.

The girls managed to dodge them. Desperately Sally looked about her for sight of the man she was seeking ; and then, as she was rushing past the big writing-room, she saw him seated in a deep armchair over by a graceful palm.

Sally pulled to a dead stop.

Her brain raced. Suddenly she grabbed at Fay's arm, spoke swiftly.

" My hat ! It might work ! " Fay exclaimed. " Yes, I'll do it."

Into the writing-room she strode.

" Ticket No. 50 wins ! " Fay shouted.

" Eh ? Wins what ? " demanded one of the passengers in there.

" A prize of ten pounds ! " Fay cried.

" But we didn't know——"

" A surprise competition," Fay said. " You'll find a number on your ticket. Anybody got Ticket No. 50 ? "

The man sitting by the palm stirred. An eager gleam came into his eyes. Quickly he dived a hand into his pocket, and brought out an envelope.

" I have Ticket No. 50," he said.

" Oh, splendid ! " Fay cried. " Just let me see it, please."

She went up to him as he held it out. She saw that he kept a tight grip on the ticket, as if to make sure she did not take it from him ; then from out of the corner of her eye she saw something else.

There was a quick movement behind the palm. Suddenly Sally darted forward, and, before the man was aware of her intention, had snatched the ticket from his grasp.

" Miss Tessa Lawley ! " she cried. " Well, if that's your name I'm a kipper ! This isn't your ticket at all ! "

The man gave a bellow of rage, tried to grab at the ticket. But Sally sprang backwards—right into the arms of the purser, who had just appeared.

" Got you, Miss Warner ! Now you will come with me to the captain ! " he said breathlessly, tightly holding on to Sally's arm.

" Delighted ! " Sally smiled. " And you'd better ask this gentleman to come as well. I'm sure the captain will be most awfully pleased to meet him ! "

. . . . . .

Five minutes later, in the captain's presence, Sally told her story—not that many explanations were needed. The ticket, with Tessa's name on it, soon put matters right.

Tessa, who was also there, let out a glad cry.

" Oh, Sally, you clever darling ! " she laughed. " But I still don't see how you knew that you would get the winning ticket."

" Well, it seemed to me that nobody was likely to miss the chance of winning ten pounds," Sally chuckled. " I happened to see No. 50 on your ticket just before the man snatched it away from me on the sports deck ; so I got Fay to say that that was the winning number, hoping he would show it, so that I could make a grab for it. There wasn't a competition, of course, and no prize of ten pounds. And now you can come and watch me win at deck quoits ! "

Tessa, happy now, a stowaway no longer, did watch—and she it was who cheered loudest and longest when Sally did win.

The Dorian sailed on, taking Tessa towards Puerto.

There she would find the happiness she sought awaiting her. The man who had stolen her ticket at Santa Maria was questioned by the captain. It became revealed that he had overheard Sally talking to Fay, had realised where Tessa was hiding, and told the captain.

But now, his trickery exposed, he would no longer be a menace to Tessa. He had schemed to delay Tessa so that she would not arrive at Puerto to meet her relatives, and had meant to pass off his own niece as Tessa, knowing that in due course she would come into a large sum of money.

But there was no fear of that now. Sally had seen to that!

By the time the cruising liner reached Puerto a few weeks later, Tessa had become a staunch friend of Sally & Co., and although the girl who had come aboard as a stowaway was naturally eager to meet her relatives, yet it was a little sadly that she stood by the deck rail, waiting for the gangway to be let down.

"I'm afraid it's—it's good-bye," she whispered, turning with a rather wan smile. "Thank you all ever so much for giving me such a wonderful time—especially you, Sally." Quiveringly she shook them, one by one, by the hand. "I—I wish I were going on with you," she faltered.

Sally put a fond arm around her.

"I wish you were, too, dear," she said. "We'd have ever such fun together, and—oh, but what's the good of wishing!" she finished a little unsteadily. "I'm afraid it isn't possible. Good-bye, Tessa, and—the best of luck. Don't forget to write."

"I—I won't," breathed Tessa, and, after giving Sally a quick hug, she waved to the rest of the boys and girls standing there, and a little reluctantly went down the gangway.

But to Sally & Co.'s surprise—and delight—she was not gone for long. Before lunch she was back again, smiling and radiant.

"Sally! Sally!" she shouted, as she came running along the deck and saw Sally & Co. playing quoits. "I've got wonderful news! I want you all to come ashore for lunch, and to meet my aunt and uncle. And that's not all," she went on excitedly. "My relatives are ever so rich, and they say they need a long holiday, and so——"

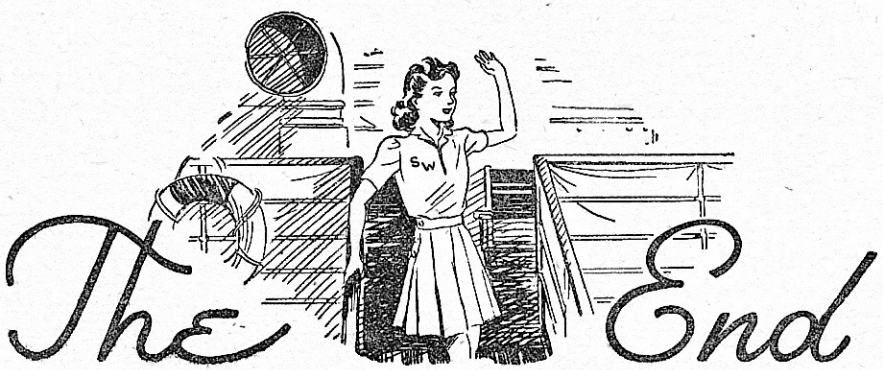
Breathlessly she paused, and Sally gave a delighted whoop.

"And so they've decided to go for a trip aboard the jolly old Dorian?" she prompted.

Tessa, her eyes like stars, nodded.

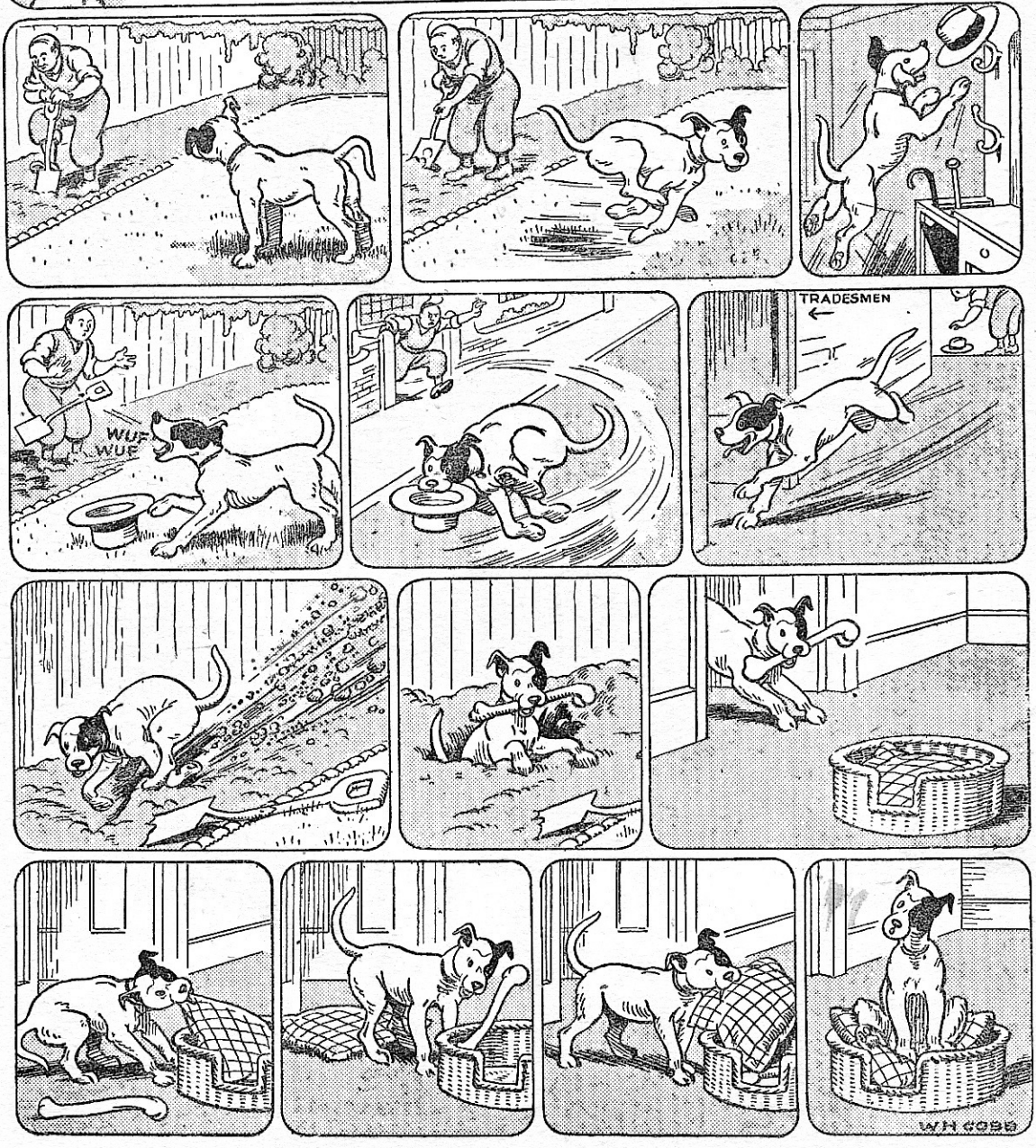
"Yes—and I'm to come, too!" she announced.

Sally gave a cheer that was quickly echoed by all her chums, then they all hurried off to get their hats and coats—eager to accept Tessa's luncheon invitation—a luncheon that now was to be a happy celebration party.



BIMBO'S TREASURE

Bimbo was alarmed when he saw his master digging in the garden, for his precious bone was buried there.



By
GAIL WESTERN

HER HORSE Was the Prize

There wasn't a finer horse than Blackie in the whole Wild West, and Molly Malone loved him —but unless she won the big race she would have to hand him over to her unscrupulous rival!

CHAPTER I

THE GIRL WHO WANTED TO BUY BLACKIE

"BUT surely you can give me a month's extension?"

Appealingly Molly Malone faced the manager of the Red Gulch bank. The bank manager sighed. He was a kindly man, and he hated to see anyone in distress, especially such a young and pretty person as the girl boss of Sunshine Ranch.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid you'll have to see Joseph Rockly, our president. He's down here on his annual visit, you know, and he's personally looking after all our mortgage arrangements."

"Oh!"

Molly frowned. She was thinking how disastrous it would be if the bank president did not grant her request.

Molly's father was the owner of Sunshine Ranch, but at the moment he was in hospital. Since his illness Molly had struggled hard to keep the ranch going. The cowboys had rallied to her aid and, in the main, her plucky efforts had succeeded, but it was imperative that she should quickly raise four hundred dollars.

The bank held a mortgage on the ranch, and unless the debt were paid, they would have the power to sell the property.

" It's not as if I can't pay," Molly said. " I only want a month's grace. Next month I shall get payment for the cattle we sold on Wednesday."

The manager smiled. Rising to his feet, he patted the Wild West girl reassuringly.

" Don't you worry, my dear," he said. " I'm sure the president will grant you the extension you want. Pop along and see him right away. He's staying at the Flying Fox Ranch, you know."

Comforted by his words, Molly departed. As she emerged from the bank, she saw that an expensive car was drawn up alongside the hitch-rack, to which she had tethered her horse Blackie.

An elegantly dressed girl was standing up in the car, surveying the big, black horse in evident admiration. She turned her head as Molly strode forward.

" This animal belong to you ? " she asked. As Molly nodded the motorist gave the horse another envious look. " He sure is a fine-looking beast," she declared. " Just the kind I've been looking for. Tell you what, I'll give you two hundred dollars for him."

Molly shook her head.

Though she was badly in need of money, she would never dream of selling Blackie. He was her most treasured possession. She had had him ever since he was a foal, and a deep affection had grown up between them.

" No, thanks ; he's not for sale," she said.

" Gee, don't say that ! " The other girl's lips pouted with annoyance. " I've taken a real liking to him. Look here, I'll raise my offer to five hundred."

Again Molly shook her head.

" Seven-fifty, then ? "

" No, thank you. I'm afraid you're wasting your time. Blackie isn't for sale. I wouldn't part with him for seven thousand, let alone seven hundred."

As she spoke, Molly put a foot in the near-side stirrup and leapt into the saddle, but the stranger was not to be put off. She was frankly scowling now. Whoever she was, it was plain that she was used to getting her own way.

" But I tell you, I'm set on having that horse," she cried, " so don't act the fool. Tell me how much you want for him ! "

Molly flushed. She resented the other girl's manner.

" I tell you he's not for sale," she repeated. " Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be getting on. I'm in a hurry."

But before she could ride off, the girl motorist grabbed her irritably by the arm.

" Look here," she snapped. " I know you're hard up. You're the girl who runs Sunshine Ranch, aren't you ? Ah, I thought as much. Well, I happen to know you're on the point of being sold up, so you'd better not be so high-and-mighty ! "

A sneer marred her pretty face.

" I guess a pauper like you ought to be glad of a chance to raise some money. Now, here's my last offer. One thousand dollars—will you take it or leave it ? "

" I wouldn't touch it if I was penniless," snapped Molly, and dragged free her arm—so quickly that the scowling motorist lost her balance and toppled over the wing of the car.

There came a delighted guffaw from the bystanders as she hung there, squealing and kicking out savagely with her smart city shoes. But Molly was too angry to linger. Without a backward glance, she sent Blackie galloping up the street.

" Fancy thinking that you could be bought and sold like an old car," she said to Blackie. " Why, I wouldn't part with you, honey, not for all the money in the world ! "

And with fond eyes she gazed down at the velvety head in front of her.

As she rode out to the Flying Fox Ranch, there suddenly came the roar of an engine,

the whir of madly revolving wheels and a long, red sports car came thundering alongside.

It was the one owned by the sulky girl who had tried to buy Blackie.

Molly gave a startled gasp as clouds of choking dust enveloped both herself and her horse. The car passed so closely that Blackie had to swerve to avoid being knocked down. He reared up in alarm but Molly managed to quieten him down.

"Of all the mean things!" she gasped. "She deliberately tried to scare Blackie!"

When the car was well in front of them she sent her four-footed chum galloping forward again. They reached the Flying Fox Ranch, only to find that Joseph Rockly was on the point of departing in his car for Red Gulch.

He was a big, heavy-jowled man, with stony eyes and a thin mouth. He listened impatiently to Molly's request, then waved a fat hand towards the house."

"You'd better see my daughter," he growled.

"Your—your daughter?"

Molly stared in surprise, and he nodded.

"Yep, Rene's got full power to act," he said. "If she thinks it wise to grant you an extension—O.K. But if she decides against it—well, then the four hundred dollars will have to be paid over right away."

And, getting into his car, he drove off before the girl boss of Sunshine Ranch could utter another word. In bewilderment she stared at the ranch-house.

"What an extraordinary man!" she exclaimed. "Why on earth has he left this business to his daughter to deal with?"

She soon knew, for at that moment a languid figure emerged from the ranch-house. Molly took one look, then her face paled. The new-comer was the girl who had tried to buy Blackie.

The one person who could grant her request for time in which to pay off the mortgage money was the spiteful motorist who had passed her on the way to the ranch!

CHAPTER II

RENE'S SPITEFUL REFUSAL

"WELL, Miss High-and-Mighty, what do you want? Come to beg a favour, eh?"

There was malice in Rene Rockly's hazel eyes, a spiteful smile of satisfaction on her lips. Plainly, she was enjoying her position of power.

Molly's first impulse was to re-mount Blackie and ride away. The thought of asking this girl a favour was unbearable. Plain enough what had happened.

Rene, guessing what was afoot, had persuaded her father to let her deal with the girl boss of Sunshine Ranch. Rene was the apple of the bank president's eye; he responded to her every whim.

Biting her lip, Molly half-turned away, and then, with a gasp of dismay, she realised that, no matter how distasteful it was, she must humble herself. Sunshine Ranch was at stake. Unless she secured the vital extension, the property would be sold.

In four weeks' time Molly would have plenty of money with which to pay off the debt, but at the moment she hardly had a penny.

"Well?" Rene asked mockingly. "Don't stand there gaping like an idiot. You had plenty to say for yourself down in the town. What's brought you here? Changed your mind about selling your horse?"

Molly faced her grimly, though she could not keep the scorn in her eyes from showing.

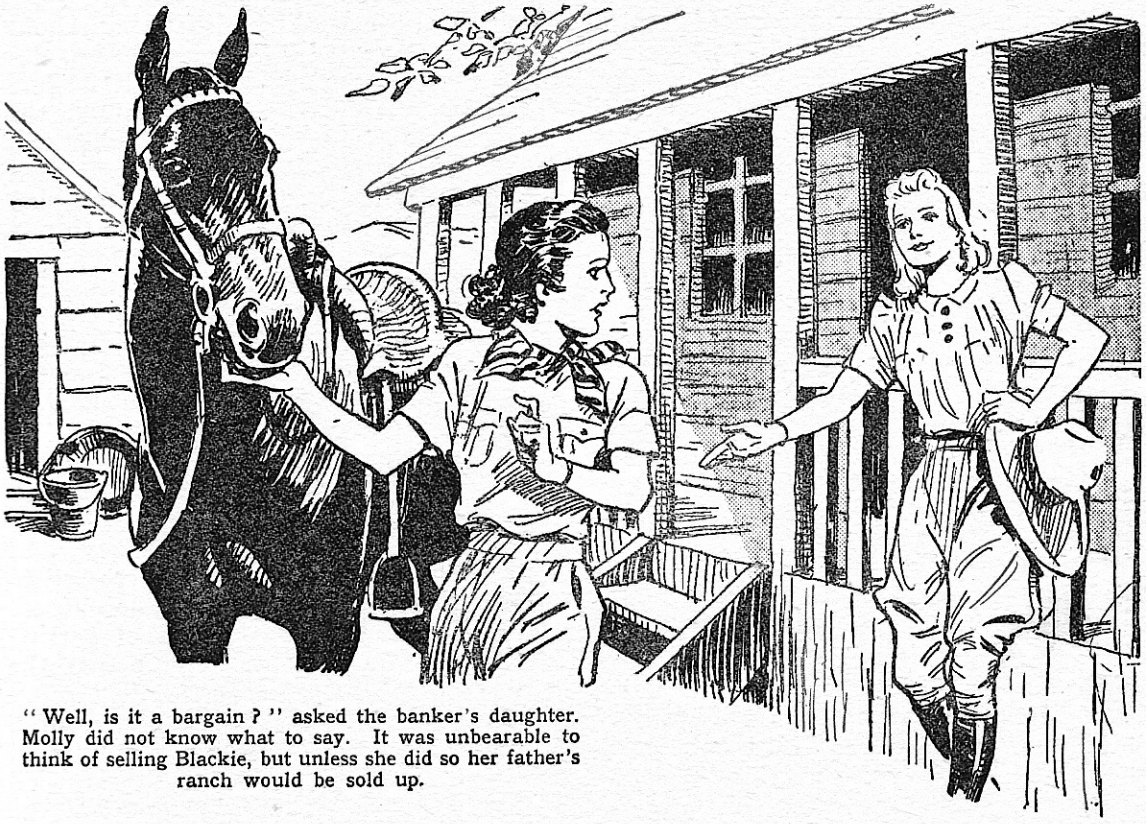
"You know I haven't," she said. "I've come about the mortgage on Sunshine Ranch. It's due to be paid to-morrow, but I want a month's extension."

"And suppose I refuse to grant it?" asked Rene, smiling aggravatingly.

Molly flushed. How she would have liked to have told this spiteful girl exactly what she thought of her! But she dared not.

"You could not be so cruel!" she gasped. "Oh, I know you're annoyed because I wouldn't sell Blackie. But I love him. He's the only friend I've got, and—and——"

Her voice broke.



" Well, is it a bargain ? " asked the banker's daughter. Molly did not know what to say. It was unbearable to think of selling Blackie, but unless she did so her father's ranch would be sold up.

" Please be generous ! " she said. " I only want a month's extension. I can pay the money easily then. If you knew what Sunshine Ranch meant to me——"

Rene cut in with an unpleasant chuckle.

" I do. That's why I'm going to refuse your request," she said. " I won't grant you a day—not even a minute. If the money isn't paid by ten o'clock tomorrow, then you'll be sold up ! "

Molly stared helplessly. It seemed useless to argue. Dismally she turned away, clutching at Blackie's bridle. That faithful horse seemed to sense his young mistress' distress. He whinnied his sympathy and nuzzled her with his soft nose.

Rene surveyed the big black horse enviously, and suddenly she came to a decision.

" Hold on ! " she cried.

Molly turned instantly, new hope in her eyes.

" You've changed your mind ? " she gulped.

Rene laughed.

" Not exactly, but I've got a sporting proposition to make to you. Sell me your horse, and I'll grant you the extension you want. I've entered for the Two Mile Steeplechase next week, and I guess on that fellow I ought to win ! "

Eagerly she stepped forward.

" Well ? " she asked. " Is it a bargain ? I'll give you a thousand dollars for Blackie, as you call him, and extend the mortgage another month, into the bargain. If you're so keen on keeping Sunshine Ranch, I reckon you ought to jump at the offer ! "

Molly's first emotion was one of indignation, then a desperate gleam came into her eyes as she thought of the Two Mile Steeplechase. It was to be the main event of the race meeting being held at Red Gulch next Monday. Molly herself had entered for it, and according to Slim Groves, Sunshine's boyish foreman, she stood a good chance of winning it.

The prize was five hundred dollars, and——

Molly caught in her breath. New hope gleamed in her eyes. Rene surveyed her impatiently.

" Well," she asked, " do you accept my offer ? "

To her surprise and chagrin, Molly shook her head.

" No ; but I will make you another," the girl boss said. " You're very keen to buy Blackie. Very well ! Lend me four hundred dollars to pay off the mortgage, and if I don't pay you back within a week my horse is yours ! "

Rene stared.

" You mean, you won't expect a penny more ! " she cried.

Molly nodded.

" Exactly. If I pay you the money back within a week, then I keep Blackie. On the other hand, if I fail, then I'll hand the horse over to you for keeps."

The banker's daughter did not reply at once. Her eyes narrowed, and sharply she gazed at Molly, while her hard, calculating mind was weighing up the offer.

After all, she had nothing to lose. If the girl did pay her back, she would be none the worse off. But if she failed to repay her——

Rene's eyes glittered. To secure a wonder horse like Blackie for a paltry four hundred dollars, why, it would be marvellous. Besides, where could Molly hope to raise the money with which to repay her ? Rene knew the girl boss' financial position. Her father had told her all about it.

" She's practically penniless," Rene told herself. " That horse is as good as mine already."

Her mind made up, she nodded.

" Very well," she said, " it's a bargain. Come into the house, and I'll make out a formal agreement. We'll both sign it, then I'll hand you the money."

Her heart beating with relief, Molly followed the other girl indoors. One tremendous worry, at least, was off her mind. To-morrow she would be able to pay off the mortgage. Whatever happened, Sunshine Ranch was safe. But what about Blackie ?

As she signed the document Rene had drawn up, Molly shot a glance through the window. Out in the yard Blackie was waiting patiently. She felt icy fingers close over her heart. Suppose her daring plan failed ? Suppose she was not able to pay this malicious girl back her money ?

She shivered. The thought of losing her four-footed friend was unbearable.

" But I won't lose him—I won't," she told herself ; then looked up to find the banker's daughter holding out a sheaf of twenty-dollar notes.

" Here's the cash," said Rene, and she smiled maliciously. " I'll call and collect Blackie next Tuesday."

Silently Molly took the money and walked to the door, but as she crossed to where the big, black horse stood, she paused.

" I shouldn't be so certain of getting him," she said. " Don't forget that the race meeting's held on Monday."

" The—the race meeting ! " Rene stared in bewilderment ; then, as she guessed what was in Molly's mind, she scowled furiously. " You little twister ! " she shrilled. " Don't say you mean to enter for the two-mile steeplechase ! "

Molly smiled.

" I'm not only going to enter for it," she replied coolly, " but I mean to win the five hundred dollars offered as prize ! "

. . . . . .

" Come on, Miss Molly ! "

" Let's see what that hoss o' yours can do in a trial."

Molly smiled as she heard the excited shouts. It was the following afternoon, and the girl boss of Sunshine Ranch was engaged in a trial race.

A two-mile stretch of ground had been marked out, and crude hurdles had been set up at regular intervals along the improvised course. By the old pine-tree that formed the winning-post, Slim Groves and all the other cowboys stood.

Eagerly they watched the Wild West girl come thundering along to the first hurdle. There was no need for Molly to use a whip or spurs. She just whispered to the intelligent horse she was riding

" Up, honey ! " she called. " Over you go ! "

Like a bird Blackie soared into the air. Cleanly, he leapt the obstacle, to go racing on to the next. Once again he jumped it with a foot or more to spare.

The ranch hands whooped and flourished their stetsons, while Slim Groves stood with his eyes glued to the stop-watch in his hand. When the thunder of hoofs told him that Molly had hurtled past the winning-post, he gave a gasp, and took another amazed look at the watch.

Reining in, Molly surveyed him anxiously.

" Well, how did we do ? " she asked.

Tilting back his broad-brimmed hat and ruffling his hair, the foreman looked up.

" Wonderful it was, Miss Molly ! You an' that horse sure are swell together ! " Slim exclaimed. " Gee, but if you do the same time on Monday, I guess you'll walk away with the race."

Molly smiled, and, leaping down from the saddle, she hugged her four-footed friend as though she could never bear to let him go.

" We must win, honey—must ! " she whispered, " because you are the prize on Monday. If I lose the race I'll lose you, too."

Happily she led Blackie back to the stable, to groom him and give him his evening meal. Little did she suspect that the trial race had been secretly watched by Rene Rockly. With the banker's daughter was a lantern-jawed, shifty-eyed cowboy from the Flying Fox ranch.

From the shelter of a clump of trees he also had timed the race, and now he shook his head grimly as he turned to the haughty girl at his side.

" You'll never beat that time," he declared, " nor will any of the other hosses entered in the steeplechase. It'd take a real Grand National winner to put that big black brute in the shade ! "

Rene bit her lip, and then impulsively laid her hand on her companion's arm.

" How would you like to earn a hundred dollars, Jeff ? " she asked.

Her companion grinned.

" Would a duck swim ? " he guffawed.

" Then here's your chance," declared Rene swiftly. " Listen ! "

With her sullen face, white with vindictive fury, she leaned across and dropped her voice to a whisper. If she couldn't obtain Blackie by fair means, then there were other means !

CHAPTER III

THEY TRIED TO KIDNAP BLACKIE

" GEE ! What on earth's happening ? It sounds like Blackie ! "

Molly, in the act of undressing, straightened up with a gasp of alarm. From the direction of the stables had come a series of angry squeals, accompanied by the thud of viciously lunging hoofs.

Hurriedly Molly flung on her clothes again. It was no use trying to get one of the ranch-hands to investigate the trouble, for Slim Groves and all the others had ridden into Red Gulch for a game of billiards, and they had not yet returned.

It was the night before the race-meeting, and except for Eliza, the negro housekeeper, Molly was alone at the ranch.

" Perhaps it's a mouse," she told herself as she hurried downstairs.

She knew how all horses hated mice—Blackie more than most. Though her four-footed friend had tons of courage, the sight of a harmless mouse would send him into a frenzy.

But it was something more sinister than a mouse that had caused the commotion. Under cover of darkness, three ruffianly looking men had sneaked over the fence and crept along to the stables.

One was the cowboy named Jeff whom Rene had bribed. The others were cronies of his, and all three were trying to drag Blackie out of the stable.

But the horse proved a tough handful. Usually he was as meek as a kitten, but now his eyes were rolling with rage. His strong teeth gnashed the air. His head tossed violently. His powerful legs lunged in and out like piston-rods.

Molly, coming unobserved on the scene, stood and gasped.

" Why, they're trying to steal Blackie ! " she exclaimed, and, despite the seriousness of the situation, had to laugh.

For only too obviously the horse-stealers had bitten off more than they could chew. One lay doubled up in the manger, deposited there by one of Blackie's well-directed kicks.

A second was clutching dazedly at a foot-long tear in his trousers. The third—Jeff himself—ran for dear life as those formidable jaws gnashed at him.

Molly could not restrain her admiration.

" Bravo, Blackie ! " she cried. " That's the stuff ! Give the rascals what for ! "

With a startled snarl, the lantern-faced cowboy turned as Molly spoke. Seeing the girl boss standing there, he sucked his bruised knuckles and gave an excited shout.

" Come on, boys ! " he called. " Never mind that brute ! If we can't grab him, we'll get the girl ! "

As he made a grab at Molly, she dodged in alarm, but Jeff thrust out a lanky leg. Molly tripped over it and fell sprawling. Next moment she felt rough fingers seize her.

" Blackie ! " she cried. " Blackie ! "

But instantly a hand went over her mouth.

" Shut up, or you'll get hurt ! " snarled Jeff. " Come on, pards, let's beat it while the going's good ! "

Despite Molly's frenzied struggles, he swept her off her feet and flung her across his shoulder. Hurriedly the trio made for where they had left their own horses.

But from behind came the clatter of hoofs. A black shape hurtled into view. Blackie ! The faithful horse was charging to his mistress' help.

Another second and Molly might have been saved, but in the nick of time one of the ruffians slammed the yard gate in the oncoming horse's face.

With a snort of fury, Blackie backed. He gathered himself for a desperate leap, but even as he went soaring upwards, another of the kidnappers seized up a long billet of wood and flung it viciously at the jumping animal.

Molly, in the act of being flung across Jeff's saddle, gave a choking gasp. The missile had struck Blackie right between the legs. She saw her faithful pet somersault over, heard him give a squeal of pain, then saw him crash down to the hard ground

" Oh, you brutes—you've hurt him ! " sobbed Molly.

She beat savagely at the man, who now jumped up into the saddle, but it was like a fly hitting an elephant. Jeff only leered.

" Aw, shut your jaw ! " he ordered. " The hoss ain't hurt, and neither will you be if you're sensible. We're taking care of you until after the races."

" Until after the races ! "

Like a lightning flash Molly realised the truth. This was a plot to prevent her from winning the two-mile steeplechase. But who could have put these ruffians up to this wicked kidnapping ?

Obvious the answer—Rene Rockly ! She had the banker's unscrupulous daughter to thank for this. She had told the trio to kidnap the horse. Blackie had been too much for them, so they had decided to make off with his mistress.

Molly's heart turned to stone. Unless she got free she would be unable to ride to-morrow.

Hung like a sack of coals over the front of the saddle, she was whirled away. The blood ran to her head. The jolting of the horse sent fiery stabs of pain down her body, and her distress made her brain whirl.

At last outraged nature could stand no more. Molly gave a long, drawn-out moan, then her eyes closed, and her senses left her.

When she recovered consciousness she was alone—lying on the dusty floor of what seemed to be a loft.

Weakly she sat up, to gaze about her. What had happened ? Where was she ? And then the sunshine, streaming through chinks in the wooden shutter that barred the window, brought the truth back with a rush.

" Gee, it's the day of the race ! " she gasped. " I must have been unconscious all night ! But where have they put me ? "

For a moment she could not understand why her captors had not bound and gagged her. They must be very sure of her help-

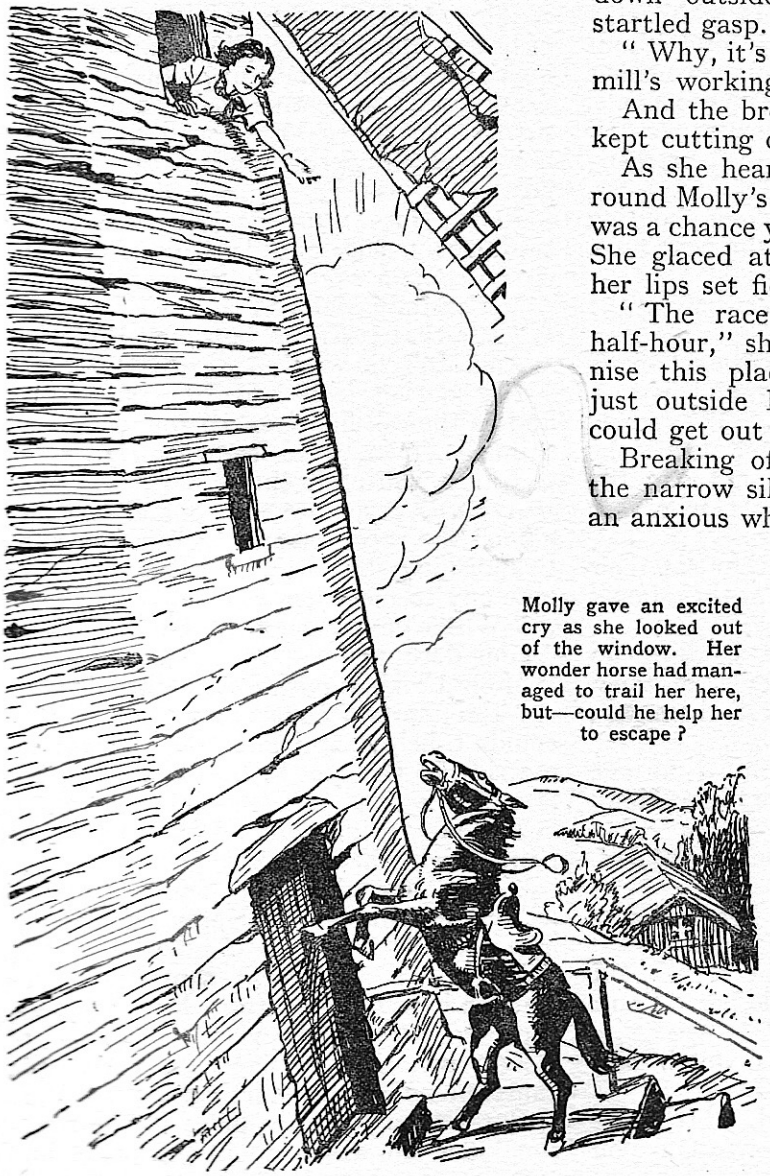
lessness. But when she rose to her feet and explored her prison, she discovered the reason for the lack of bonds.

She was locked up in the loft of an old windmill, thirty feet from the ground.

Eagerly she peered through the small window. Plainly now she could see the ground. She could see something else—a black shape that was hammering at the outside door with furious hoofs.

Molly gave an excited gulp.

" Blackie ! " she cried.



Molly gave an excited cry as she looked out of the window. Her wonder horse had managed to trail her here, but—could he help her to escape ?

And her faithful horse it was. He had managed to trail her here, though he had arrived too late to rescue his mistress from her kidnappers.

Hearing her voice, Blackie looked up, to whinny pitifully, as though asking why she did not join him.

And then there came a whirring creak and momentarily the horse was blotted out. Molly could not understand what had happened at first, then as she glimpsed another shadowy object come sweeping down outside the window she gave a startled gasp.

" Why, it's the sails ! " she cried. " The mill's working ! "

And the broad, slatted sails it was that kept cutting off her view.

As she heard them creaking round and round Molly's pulses began to race. There was a chance yet of outwitting her enemies. She glaced at her wrist-watch, and then her lips set fiercely.

" The race doesn't start for another half-hour," she murmured, " and I recognise this place now. It's the old mill just outside Red Gulch. Gee, if only I could get out of here——"

Breaking off, she clambered up on to the narrow sill. From down below came an anxious whinny, and she saw Blackie's big eyes turned on her.

Soothingly she smiled.

" All right, honey," she said. " I'll be joining you in a minute ! "

Then she braced herself and flung up her arms, her eyes fixed on the next sail as it clattered down towards her. When it came near enough she meant to try to clutch it.

It was a hazardous plan. If her wild jump was not perfectly timed, if her grabbing hands failed to gain a hold, she would go crashing to the ground far below.

" Oh, my goodness ! " she gulped, then pluckily she banished the fear from her mind.

The perspiration beading on her brow, she crouched grimly. One more moment of agonising suspense, and then——

She risked all on a wild, frantic outward leap. As the huge sail came clattering towards her, she launched herself into the air, her arms outflung, her slim fingers frenziedly clawing for a grip

CHAPTER IV

AT THE RACECOURSE

"You say she's not here?"

Slim Groves' boyish face was haggard with anxiety. All day he had been looking for Molly, but without result. Finally, he and the other cowboys were making inquiries at the racecourse.

But the man at the main entrance had declared he had seen nothing of the missing girl.

Slim, hearing the bookmakers shouting the names of the entries for the next race, went deathly white.

"It's the steeplechase next, pards," he muttered.

The little band of cowboys exchanged glum glances. They knew what this race meant to the Wild West girl. They knew that Blackie was the prize for which she was competing. If she did not win the race she would have to part with her beloved horse.

Not knowing what to do, they sat their horses, listening dismally to the shouts from inside the racecourse.

The various jockeys were saddling up their horses. There were seven of them in all—all girls—and amongst them was Rene Rockly.

The banker's daughter smiled as she heard the starter inquire for Molly Malone.

"Anyone seen her?" he demanded. "It's time she was here."

Rene's eyes gleamed, but her face was sympathetic.

"Oh, what a shame!" she cried. "I expect something's delayed her. Can't you give her a few minutes?"

The starter looked at his watch and shook his head.

"Not a second," he growled. "It's past the official starting time now. Off you go, you lot. Down to the starting-gate. She'll have to be scratched."

Rene could hardly smother her delight. Whether she won or lost the race mattered little now. Whatever happened, Blackie was as good as hers!

"Gee, but I'd like to see that little trickster's face when she has to hand over her horse," she chuckled, as she followed the other riders down the course. "She'll fairly break her heart——"

She broke off, and so great was her surprise that she nearly fell out of the saddle. Blankly she stared. Hundreds of others were staring also—staring at the high fence at the far end of the course.

Suddenly a great black shape had soared over it—a long-legged figure that now came thundering towards the starting-post.

Rene's face went deathly white. Incredulously she gaped while from the crowd came a wild, relieved roar:

"It's Molly Malone!"

"It's that gal from Sunshine Ranch!"

And Molly it was!

Her daring leap had been successful, and as the sail had creaked round she had shinned down, then leapt safely on to Blackie's waiting back.

A hard, desperate gallop and she had gained the racecourse in the nick of time. Brandishing his flag, the starter rode his pony to meet her.

"Where've you bin?" he demanded. "How dare you——"

Molly broke in with a desperate plea.

"I'm sorry," she panted, "but I couldn't help being late. Oh, please let me ride in the race! Don't say I'm too late!"

The starter glowered, but irritably he pointed with his flag.

"Very irregular," he said, "but I'll let it pass this time. Hurry up and get into place."

Molly felt as though some enormous load had been taken from her shoulders. Gasping her relief, very conscious of Rene's furious eyes fixed upon her, she cantered on to the starting-line.

But as she took her place in the ranks she knew an awful doubt. Blackie had

already had a hard ride; would he be equal to a second? After that headlong gallop from the windmill, would he be able to win this gruelling two-mile steeplechase?

Anxiously the girl boss patted her horse's moist, perspiring neck, and Blackie turned his head, to survey her unwinkingly, his long tail swishing the air.

Even that intelligent horse could not speak, but if looks counted for anything, Blackie was telling his mistress to leave it to him.

"I won't let you down," his faithful eyes seemed to say. "I know I'm the prize, and I'll see that you win it!"

. . . . . .

"GOLDEN LAD for a certainty!"

"No, it's The Miller—look, he's coming in front!"

"Rats! Tiptree is walking it! Come on, Tiptree! Attaboy!"

Conflicting shouts arose as the long line of horses charged round the distance bend. Slim Groves and the rest of the Sunshine Ranch boys watched anxiously.

They had learnt of Molly's last-minute arrival just in time to gain entrance to the course. Hearts thumping madly, they watched the first horse make an attempt to jump the next hurdle.

"It's a grey!" groaned Slim, screwing up his stetson in his anxiety. "There's Miss Molly behind! She must have had a bad start, and so—— Great jumping snakes, but the grey's down!"

It was true enough. The leader had caught his hoof on the top bar of the hurdle Down he flopped, his girl jockey somersaulting out of the saddle. A second horse tripped and fell. There was a mad mix-up in front of the barrier, but clearly three horses jumped and drew clear.

In a frenzy of excitement Slim peered through the binoculars he had managed to hire. His pals all clustered wildly around him. The three leading horses were too far away to be recognised by the naked eye.

"Who's in front? Who's in front?" gasped out Jerry Morton, the bandy-legged horse-breaker. "Lend us those glasses!"

As he and Slim struggled for possession of the binoculars a mighty yell went up:

"Golden Lad is in front—Golden Lad is ahead!"

Slim Groves gave a groan. Golden Lad was the horse ridden by Rene Rockly. With a sudden, excited shove, he sent Jerry Morton sprawling and feverishly clapped the glasses back to his eyes.

Two of the horses were just soaring over the next hurdle. One was Golden Lad. The other was——

Blackie!

Madly the young foreman yelled. Wildly his pals followed his example.

"Come on, Miss Molly!"

"Attagirl!"

The excitement grew to fever heat as the two leading horses went thundering towards the next fence. They were galloping side by side. All their rivals were far away. The race was between these two—Blackie and Golden Lad.

A tense hush descended over the racecourse as together the two horses jumped. Cleanly they cleared the obstacle, but Golden Lad stumbled in landing.

Savagely the banker's daughter lashed him with her whip.

"Get on, you brute—get on!" she shrilled.

But Blackie had taken the lead. Molly was smiling now. She knew she had as good as won. Blackie was thundering over the sun-baked ground like a rocket. Faster and faster, tireless, effortless.

The ill-treatment he had received caused Golden Lad to put on one final, frenzied spurt. As the last hurdle loomed ahead he again drew level with his big, black rival.

But Rene knew that her horse could not keep up this gruelling pace. She knew she was beaten. Beyond this hurdle there was two furlongs of straight to cover. That last spring was beyond the flagging Golden Lad.

Rene gathered her mount together for the last jump. She scowled at Molly, and then, almost insane with rage, she brought her whip whistling down straight for Blackie's broad back.

The blow was struck just as the horse soared over the hurdle. The sudden pain

caused Blackie to twist in midair and as he landed on the other side of the obstacle he stumbled and almost fell headlong.

Rene gave a spiteful laugh of triumph, and in a flash she had taken the lead. But from the watching crowd had come a yell of horror. Molly, unprepared for her mount's twist and stumble, had been jerked out of the saddle.

Now she hung head downwards, one foot imprisoned in a stirrup. If she had not kept calm she would have been badly injured. As it was she gave a gasping shout, and instantly the well-trained Blackie slithered to a standstill.

Desperately Molly grabbed up at the dangling stirrup. With an acrobatic twist she regained the saddle, and before the spectators could recover from the first shock she was galloping on again.

But Golden Lad had established a fifty-yard lead.

"Come on, honey!" Molly called. "We have simply got to beat that girl now!"

Nobly the big black horse responded. At amazing speed he shot down the straight. Faster—faster yet! The crowd cheered excitedly.

But the winning-post was looming very near now. It was only a hundred yards away—eighty—sixty!

And still Molly was a few feet behind. She shouted to her horse again, urged him on—on. And then, with a thud of hoofs, he drew abreast. Rene looked round with a scowl. Cruelly she whipped her flagging horse, but in vain. Like a comet Blackie flashed by, to go thundering on—first past the post by nearly two lengths.

. . . . . .

SLIM GROVES and the other cowboys were furious when Molly told them the reason for her last-minute arrival at the racecourse, and the young foreman gave a startled exclamation as she described the chief kidnapper.

"That sounds like Jeff Summers of the Flying Fox," he declared, but made no further comment, though shortly afterwards he and the others became strangely missing.

Molly had to ride back to Sunshine Ranch on her own. Happily she changed into a frock in readiness for the celebration dinner that Eliza had prepared in the dining-hut.

The place had been decorated with bunting, silver horseshoes, and with gaily coloured streamers, and the negro housekeeper had roasted a turkey specially for the occasion.

Molly, expecting the boys to be already there, gazed around in astonishment, for the hut was empty.

It was not until ten minutes later that the door opened, and Slim Groves and the rest filed in, all looking rather sheepish. Slim had lost his hat; Jerry Morton, the bandy-legged horse-breaker, was admiring his bruised knuckles, while one of the others was dabbing at a discoloured eye.

Molly looked at them in consternation.

"What ever's been happening?" she cried. "You—you haven't been fighting, have you?"

"Fighting?" Slim looked shocked. "What notions you do get, Miss Molly! We're real peaceable fellows we are, ain't we, boys?"

There came a hurried chorus of assent, and discreetly Molly did not pursue the matter further. But if she could have heard the groans that came from the Flying Fox bunk-house she would have understood.

Jeff Summers and his two cronies bitterly regretted ever having accepted Rene Rockly's bribes. As for that girl, she thought it wise to leave Red Gulch, and she never visited it again. Nor was anyone sorry to see her go—certainly not Molly and Blackie!

THE END

The stirring story of a courageous Norwegian girl who staked all in a desperate effort to help a British airman to escape from the Hitlerite invaders.

The Girl Who Outwitted The Nazis

By

JOAN MAITLAND

CHAPTER I

THE R.A.F. PILOT'S PROMISE

"DADDY is in England, you see, little Tina. But he thinks of us both here in Norway just as we think of him!" Perle Vaarden assured her small sister.

"And when shall we see Daddy again?" eagerly persisted Christina.

"Very soon, pet!" And Perle turned hastily to the cauldron of porridge on the farmhouse stove. "See, we have lovely rommegrod for your dinner to-day!"

She filled Tina's plate quickly, hoping to distract the child's mind. The porridge was Norwegian "grod" made from sour cream, and it was one of the few things that hadn't changed since the Germans had invaded the country like a plague of locusts. Perle reached for the tiny canister of sugar, and the cinnamon.

But her little sister was still gazing through the farmhouse window, watching the blue waters of the fiord in the bay below, and her puzzled voice went on:

"You always say very soon we shall see Daddy. But, Perle, it is so long now——"

"And England is a long way, my Tina!"

"Can't we go in a boat like Daddy did?"

"Some day we shall, darling," promised Perle, and again she fell back on those two little words—"very soon!"

Tina laughed now, for she was sure that Perle was keeping the day a happy surprise for her. It was lovely looking forward to meeting Daddy again. All the better, really, to have the day kept a secret. She sat down to her porridge in innocent bliss.

Perle added a sprinkling of sugar; not very much, for during these days of war

sugar, like everything else, was very scarce. As she seated herself beside her small sister she smiled sadly and yet proudly across at her father's empty chair.

He had fought his way to England when the Germans came. Braving their bombs and bullets, battling with the seas in a puny little fishing-boat, he had gone to Britain to fight with free men against the hated Nazis, who had ravaged his country. To fight for everything he held dearest in life. For Perle, for little Tina, for the home they had loved in their once-peaceful Norway. And to fight with all the passionate Viking blood that ran in his veins.

The Viking blood was in Perle's veins, too. She didn't weaken. Daughter of a known rebel—distrusted and suspected by the Nazis—she just snapped her fingers at them all, carrying all the work of the farm on her young shoulders, taking care of little Tina, doing her duty at home as her dad was doing his duty far away in free England.

" Perle is not eating," ruminated Tina over her porridge.

" Perle is busy, my love ! " she was told with a laugh.

Picking up a basket, Perle went out across the farmyard to the henhouse. The fowls came clucking to her eagerly, then dispersed in a huff when they saw that it was an empty basket she carried and not their feeding-bowl. Perle chuckled as she fumbled for eggs in the straw of the coop.

" Tchk, tchk, my greedy ones, it is now your turn to give to me——"

And then she paused. Her face slowly went pink with wrath. There were no eggs. They had been filched !

Perle's eyes gleamed. For days past this filching had been going on. So far the eggs had vanished in ones or twos. To-day they were all gone !

" The German soldiers—the Nazis ! They are the greedy ones ! " fumed Perle. " This time I catch them ! So ! "

Tight-lipped, the glint of battle in her eyes, she walked from the henhouse to the gate at the end of the paddock. Here was where the thief had come and gone. Here was his trail—a wisp of straw here and there picked up by his boots in the hencoop.

Perle threw open the gate and walked a step or two down the path. There were no more tell-tale bits of straw to guide her, but that didn't matter. The thief had taken this path right enough, and it led seawards—down to the bay and nowhere else. Perle had lived here all her life and knew the paths, every inch of them, better than any sneaking German.

She hurried sure-footed down the rugged slope. She was smiling now, though it was a brittle smile. She felt a grim kind of satisfaction. Eggs were priceless luxuries to lose ; but giving a piece of her mind to a Nazi was a compensating prospect. He would hear exactly what a Norwegian girl thought of him and his ilk. And he wouldn't get the chance to rob her again ; she'd see to that !

Climbing down a gulley, Perle came out on to the rocky little beach. Not a soul was in sight. The bay might have been deserted—except to anyone who knew its secrets.

Perle stood quite still, an ironical gleam in her eyes, then stole softly towards a cleft in the rocks. It was the mouth of a cave—Granny's Grotto, as the children called it.

A figure moved in the dim light within. Someone was there, but quite unaware of Perle's approach till her voice said clearly :

" So you are the brigand who stole my eggs ! "

The figure swung round electrified. Perle heard a boyish voice answering her in a tone momentarily startled yet oddly cheerful :

" I plead guilty, and ask your generous forgiveness ! "

But now she was staring speechless at the culprit. His eyes were dark and humorous, his tall slim figure had none of the heavy German stamp about it. His uniform was a lighter blue, and the wings on the breast were not the wings of the German eagle. They were the wings of the British Royal Air Force !

" You are "—Perle's voice came back to her in a wild rush—" you are English ? "

He nodded.

" My plane crashed while I was over here bombing the Nazis. I managed to hide before they found me ! " he told her simply.

" But—but you are in such danger——"

" Not from you, I can see ! " His eyes smiled into hers.

" Nor from any of my countrymen, dear English boy, but if the Germans catch you——" She smothered the words on her lips, determined that never, never should the Nazis catch him so long as she had wits enough to fool them. " But tell me about yourself. What is your name ? "

" Brian Trent ! "

" Bri-an Tr-r-rent." She repeated it carefully but correctly.

" It sounds nicer the way you say it. And your name ? " he asked her.

" Perle Vaarden."

His own English pronunciation clipped the vowels a little shorter. He still made it " Pearl Vardon " after several attempts to get it right. By this time they were both laughing gaily and without restraint—until Perle remembered the serious danger in which he stood. An English airman on enemy-occupied territory, the Germans probably hunting him now as a fugitive, a potential spy.

She threw a feverish glance outside the cave ; but all was quiet, the beach was still deserted.

" Speak softly. The Nazis are everywhere, they prowl quiet as wolves." And rapidly she whispered, " You must not stay here, Bri-an. They would find you. I will help you ; I will hide you."

" Bless your heart, I believe you would," he said a little huskily. " But you won't have to take that risk for me. I'm not staying over here in Norway."

" Not staying——?" She looked blank.

" Perle, I do want your help—but not to hide me," he said in a whisper. " I'm not staying in this country ! I'm planning to escape. With your help I can do it—I can get back to England."

" To England ? Bri-an, what are you saying ? "

For the moment she thought his mind was deranged, perhaps the result of his crash, poor English boy. But he took her hand and drew her into the back of the cave.

" Come and see ! "

Perle gazed spellbound. A small but powerful motor-boat stood propped up on the stones, its woodwork broken in places, but newly patched.

" It was washed ashore the night I crashed," Brian confided softly. " It's been pretty badly blitzed, but I've put some hard work in, and I've got it seaworthy again. The only thing that wants a bit of mending now is the engine. I hadn't the tools to do it. Perle, if only you can help me—if only you can beg or borrow a few motor-tools and leave them in that chicken-coop of yours—— But, gee, I'm asking the impossible ! How could you ? "

" Of course I could ! My father's tractor is motor driven. We have tools belonging to it. Are they the same ? " Perle said in a breathless rush.

" The very thing—marvellous—a gift from—— But, I say ! " He pulled himself up with a jerk. " Your father might not——"

" My father is in England—he is a fighter, like you, Bri-an," Perle was telling him joyfully. " He fights for Norway—for me—for my little sister Tina. He waits for us now in England."

Her eyes were shining as she poured out her heart to the young airman. He listened and marvelled. Her glorious courage moved him even more than the poignant tale she told. The tragic parting from her dad—the long, brave struggle alone—the need to hide the truth from her little sister—the daily promises, given with a smile from a heart that was aching, that soon, very soon, they would go to join Daddy again.

" I never believed, I never hoped it could come true," she finished up in radiant happiness, " but now it is going to be true ! Bri-an, I will give you the tools. The boat shall be mended. You will escape to England. And please, please, you will take with you my little Tina and me ? "

" But—— But, Perle——"

" The boat is small—but we, too, are small. Promise, promise, Bri-an. You will take Tina and me to England—to my father ? "

His promise was given in a word. He

took her hands in a firm, boyish grip, as she clung to him beseechingly.

" I'll take you, Perle, if it's the last thing I ever do. It was only the danger I feared for you. We must sail at night, across hundreds of miles of ocean under the planes of the Nazis——"

" My father did it, Bri-an ! "

" And we shall do it ! " The ring in his voice made her press her hand swiftly to his lips, fearing enemy eavesdroppers. But there was no smothering the pride he felt for her, nor the new zest and joy she had given him. He went on in whispered excitement : " You've made a grand show, Perle. You've beaten the Nazis all along the line. And now we'll beat them together ! Get me the tools, and you, your little sister, and me will beat it for England this nightfall ! "

" Yes "—her breath caught in her throat—" to-night, yes ! " She was no calmer than he, but experience of the enemy gave her a shrewder caution. " Until to-night, do nothing, Bri-an. Make not a sound. Do not leave this cave. When it is dark, at eight o'clock, come to me at the farm. Come through the little back gate by the henhouse ! "

" I should know my way there by now, Perle," he chuckled.

" I shall have better than eggs for you, dear English boy ! " Her laughing eyes were moist. "And I shall have the tools ! "

Minutes later she wended her way up the rocky path again. She walked as in a dream. Above her the blue skies of Norway had never seemed so bright, but her heart had already taken wing to England, to her father across the sea.

At the top of the path, the dull tramp-tramp of marching feet brought her back to reality.

A squad of German soldiers rounded the bend behind the farmhouse. They halted at a guttural order from their officer. He planted himself in front of Perle, his cold eyes searching her face.

" We are looking for an Englisch airman known to be hiding in the district. Have you seen anything of him, hein ? "

Perle looked at him in sweet surprise.

" An English airman ? Ah, if only I had met him ! What a pleasant change it would have been from German airmen ! "

" You are the farmer's daughter—insolent as ever, ja ! " he observed with a grim nod. " Answer in the name of the Fuehrer. Have you seen any man, any stranger near your farm ? "

" Only the winkle-seller ! " said Perle.

" Ach, you waste my time ! " he grated, but her frivolous answer had disarmed any suspicion he might otherwise have felt. " You have come from the bay. Tell me, you are local girl, is there any place there where the Englischer might hide ? "

" Not if he's in his right mind," cheerfully answered Perle. " I should think he would hide in the forest, Herr Officer ! "

" Ja, ja ! "

It seemed the likeliest suggestion, and with a grunt the officer marched his men off on the forest path. For once their heavy tramp sounded like music in Perle's ears. Every step was taking them safely away from Brian's hiding-place.

She passed into the farmyard, into the shed where the motor-tractor was parked. With fingers that trembled she took the toolbag from its locker. These tools were the keys to the Englishman's escape ; to her own escape, and Tina's, and their joyous reunion with Dad ! Golden keys, indeed ! Their task must be accomplished swiftly—this very night. The Germans were hunting Brian now. To-day they would scour the forest—in vain. To-morrow, he would be gone, she and Tina would be gone !

With a song on her lips, Perle worked hard all the afternoon. But not even little Tina knew her secret. Cautious to the tiniest detail, Perle collected together the few necessities she must take, but packed nothing. That should wait till the last minute. Meantime, she did every task in the house as usual, even to baking scones for breakfast—though where next day's breakfast was to be eaten no intruder would ever have guessed. Last but not least, she cooked a sumptuous stew for this evening's meal—the first meat stew for many a long day.

At seven o'clock little Tina got sleepy, as usual.

"Look what I have found!" cried little Tina, and before the startled Perle could stop her she held up the incriminating R.A.F. button.

And just as usual, Perle carried her upstairs and tucked her into bed—for Tina would need her sleep; she would soon have so much to excite her.

The excitement in Perle's heart was almost more than she could bear. Darkness fell at last. The welcome, glorious night. She closed the shutters of the windows. Tried to give her mind to the cooking, tried impossibly to be calm and possessed.

The stew was simmering when a soft tap-tap came at the kitchen door. Perle put out the lamp before she opened it. A figure stole in from the darkness, the door was softly closed, and bolted again. When the lamp was lighted once more, smiling down at her stood Brian Trent.

"You look taller now, in my so little kitchen," she laughed, her light words helping to calm the tumult of excitement seething inside her.

"And you look as though nothing could ever rattle you, Perle," he joked with her. "Not even a prowling rascal who pilfered your eggs in the night!"

"Not even that! I have a better feast for you now, Brian. See, I keep all my promises. And first"—she ran to the cupboard under the dresser—"I must give you these!"

She handed him the set of tools, and he too was trembling with excitement, but they both mastered their feelings, both went on joking. They knew they would need iron control when their perilous escape began.

Perle ladled out the steaming hot stew, and they sat down together to the strangest, happiest meal she had known since her father went away. The presence of the young Englishman was a tower of strength to her. She would have been surprised had she known that her own courage, to him, was also a tower of strength. So calmly, so steadily she discussed their plans as the meal proceeded.

"How long will it take you, Bri-an, to mend the engine?"

"I shall be ready to sail on the midnight tide!"

"It is many miles. . . . You have petrol enough?"

"Ample!" A boyish grin played on his lips. "British petrol! I got it from the old kite when I crashed, Perle, before the Nazis came on the scene!"

"Then it is your own—that is fair!" sparkled Perle. "I will join you at midnight at Granny's Grotto——"

"Where?"

"At the cave—that is the children's name for it!" she hurried on, still trying to speak calmly. "I will bring little Tina with me. She is in bed now, Bri-an. I have told her nothing. It was safer not to. She shall have her happy surprise after all, the pet! And you, you shall have some more stew—you must eat well, for the night will be long and——"

Her voice strangled in her throat.

A heavy thud sounded at the door—a rifle butt crashed against the panel.

"Open!" came a guttural, commanding voice from outside. "Open in the name of the Fuehrer!"

Perle's heart froze. Her parched lips framed a whisper:

"The Nazis!"

CHAPTER II

THE BUTTON THAT BETRAYED HER

THE shock petrified Perle. Her limbs were like ice—but her brain was clear as ice.

Only the width of the door separated the Germans from this English airman she was harbouring! Nothing could keep them out. But they should not see him. She must hide him; she must face them alone.

"Open in the name of the Fuehrer!" Their shouts were insistent, the door shook under the blows of the rifle butt.

Brian had sprung up from the table. He stood rigid, waiting. Perle darted to him. She seized his arm and drew him noiselessly towards the curtained doorway of the staircase.

"Up here, Brian! Hide!" she whispered. "Hide!"

Heart panting, she hustled him up the stairs. She whipped open the door of Tina's room. Her little sister was fast asleep in her cot and did not even stir. Perle thrust him into the room with a stifled murmur of warning.

" Stay here—don't move—leave them to me ! "

Her icy hand drew the door shut. She ran down the stairs again. She moved Brian's chair from the table—whisked the two plates on to the dresser. The clamour outside was quieter now, but ominous.

" Will you open this door, or must we break it in, hein ? " a voice grated, then rapped out a command.

Perle unbolted the door just as a splintering blow struck the woodwork.

" Villains ! Can you not wait while I put my little sister to bed ? " she cried.

Her face was a picture of righteous indignation as a Nazi patrol, led by a corporal, came stamping into the kitchen. There were four in all. Four heavy-jowled soldiers in grey-green uniform, helmeted and jackbooted, each of them armed with a rifle. Yet some of their bluster fell away now. They stood blinking stupidly at Perle in the lamplight, and even the corporal looked nonplussed.

" Who iss here in thiss house mitt you, fraulein ? " he jerked out.

" My little sister ! You are quite safe," Perle said scornfully, " she is only five ! "

" Bah ! " He tried to bully, but his face was a study of chagrin. " Who else hass been here ? "

" Only you—where you have no right to be ! "

" You haf seen no Englisch pilot, nein ?" His attempt to browbeat her was so clumsy that her heart leapt, and she realised that he himself believed he had come on a fool's errand. " We know the Englischer has been near this farm, fraulein ! We are searching for him ! " he said.

" Then search ! " Perle invited him with cool bluff. " You have come into my house unasked—you have my permission to go over it and then please to get out ! "

The bluff worked. Corporal Schneider had no intention of availing himself of Perle's offer, which he was quite certain was only given in order to make him look a fool. So he kept his dignity and ordered two of his men, instead, to search the barns and outhouses.

" The Englischer could hide out there and still you would not know it," he told Perle dryly. " He could easily fool you, fraulein ! "

" He seems to have fooled you ! " smiled Perle.

Ten minutes went by. She busied herself with some knitting. It was a little winter vest for Tina. Corporal Schneider plodded up and down the kitchen, still trying to keep his dignity, but sniffing hungrily at the stew. He grunted when his men came back at last and announced that their search had been fruitless.

" Then, now you will please go," said Perle, not even looking up from her knitting.

" Fraulein is not hospitable ! " said Schneider, swallowing his defeat and winking greedily at his men. " She has some goot stew in the pot—real meat stew. She hass not asked us to eat, so we will help ourselves, hein ? "

" Ja, ja, ja ! " gloated his men.

They all fell to, and Perle watched them grabbing crocks from her dresser, slopping the stew into anything they could find, and devouring it noisily.

" You were not expecting guests, fraulein——" the corporal taunted her, then broke off with a sudden exclamation : " Ach, what iss this ? "

Perle looked up sharply.

" You haf had another guest to-night ? " he accused, swinging round upon her.

He was pointing to the extra plate on the dresser. Brian's plate ! It stood beside her own plate and Tina's, all three still bearing the dregs of stew.

" Whose plate iss this? Someone has been there ! " he fired at her.

" Pouf ! " scoffed Perle.

But her heart was trembling ; she knew her face had changed colour. And before she could think of any wild lie to explain that plate, the corporal was making for the stairs !

" Achtung ! Come ! " he shouted to his men. " We will search ! "

Perle followed them up the stairs, her knees shaking. Doom was in her heart. She might stave off the disaster for a moment or two, but she couldn't save

Brian, couldn't prevent these Nazis discovering him in little Tina's room. They were on the landing now. Their torches were flashing on the door of her own room.

"Who iss here?" rasped the corporal, and flung the door open.

No one was there, as the torches showed. But the Germans tramped into the room and moved the bed, the furniture, and searched cupboard and wardrobe with ominous thoroughness. Perle stood watching rigidly from the doorway.

"Does that satisfy you?" she asked with brave scorn.

The corporal ignored her and marched the men along to the next room. It had been her dad's room. His photo hung on the wall—a snap of him taken years ago in the uniform of a Norwegian volunteer. It reminded Schneider that Perle's father was serving now with the British forces.

"Fraulein comes more and more unter suspicion! Search well!" he ordered his men.

Their search again revealed nothing, but now Perle's heart turned to water. There was only one more room on the landing. Tina's room! They were making for it now.

"No, no, that is only the nursery!" Feverishly she caught at the corporal's sleeve, trying to plead with him. "You would not wish to waken my little sister?"

Curtly he brushed her arm aside. A mist swam in front of her eyes. She heard him throw the door open. She tried not to look. But fascinated horror made her look. And all she saw was little Tina lying asleep in her cot!

Where was Brian?

Crazy thoughts spun in Perle's brain, then turned to wild joy. Brian had gone, Brian had escaped! How a man of his size could have squeezed through that tiny window was a sheer miracle, but the miracle had happened, he had managed it! She could see what the Nazis could not see. There had been a crossbar over the window and that crossbar had gone now. Brian had wrenched it out—Brian had gone!

"Come, there iss only the child here!" grunted the corporal, and showed his mortification by slamming the door as he and his men withdrew.

"And now, Herr Corporal, are you satisfied?" Perle asked with stinging politeness, though how she concealed her joy was indeed another miracle.

"Fraulein should not give rise to suspicion!" he snapped.

He stamped down the stairs and helped himself to more stew by way of consolation. He looked thoroughly aggrieved. He counted the plates again. They seemed to exasperate him. With his mouth full he demanded to know:

"Why iss this extra plate here?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Perle said sweetly. "It was too much trouble to wash it up at lunchtime!"

The corporal almost choked. His men blinked like enlightened owls. The sight was too much for Perle after all the strain she had endured. She threw back her head and gave a pealing laugh.

Hurriedly Perle led the young R.A.F. airman to the curtained doorway of the staircase. "Up here, Brian," she whispered. "Hide!"

Threateningly the Nazi Commandant regarded Perle. "Unless you tell me where the Englishman is hiding," he declared, "your sister will be taken away and you will never see her again."

" Come—we get out ! " exploded the corporal. He jammed down his plate ; he jammed his helmet on his head. " Fall in ! March ! This fraulein, she maddens me ! "

" You know your way out——" Perle began brightly, then broke off with a start.

She hadn't heard a soft step on the stairs ; but now the curtains parted, and there in her little pyjamas stood Tina.

" Perle, why is all these soldiers here ? They woked me up. And, look "—Tina held out her hand with eager delight—" look what I found in my room ! "

Perle's eyes glazed. Tina was holding out a glittering brass button bearing the letters R.A.F. A British airman's button !

Frantically Perle tried to seize it from the child. Too late ! The German corporal had seen and recognised that button ! He snatched it from Tina with a shout of excitement.

" Englisch ! The Englischer iss here ! It iss his ! Hold that girl—hold her ! "

While his men seized Perle by the wrists he dashed up the stairs again three at a time. Little Tina cried out with fear—bewildered, but aware that her sister was in terrible trouble. Perle herself stood frozen in every limb.

She was betrayed ! Little Tina had innocently betrayed her !

The corporal came thundering down the stairs again.

" The Englischer was here ! He escaped through the child's window ! There are marks on the sill, as well as this button to prove it. Now, fraulein "—he advanced mercilessly towards Perle—" what have you to say ? "

" Nothing ! " Perle answered through parched lips.

" You are traitor—you harboured an enemy—your danger is greater than his ! Speak ! " he bullied her. " Where is the Englischer—where does he hide ? "

" I tell you nothing ! " Perle defied him.

" Brave words ! They will not save you ! " he threatened her. " You will tell me where the Englischer hides, or "—he measured his words—" or you will tell the Commandant-General ! "

Icy fear clutched at Perle's heart. She had seen others marched away to the Nazi Commandant. They had never returned.

They had been flung into the concentration camp. Their offence had been less than hers. They had not helped the British enemy . . .

But help him she would! Betray him, never!

"I will tell you nothing!" her icy lips repeated.

Threats, cajolery, nothing would move her. The corporal gave it up at last. Her youthful courage surprised but stirred no pity in him. His eyes were cold with purpose.

"I will give you till to-morrow to think it over, fraulein!" he said. "Think well!"

He marched his men out and the door slammed behind them. Perle stood motionless, listening to the heavy tramp of their feet echoing away. A tiny hand clutched at her arm. Little Tina gazed up at her through frightened eyes.

"What is the matter, Perle? Why are you sad?"

Perle stirred herself, she even smiled.

"Sad? Bless your heart, pet, I'm not sad! Come, you should be in bed, my Tina."

She carried the little girl back to her room, put her in her cot, lifted the blankets gently over her, then the counterpane . . .

A fragment of paper dropped from under the counterpane.

Perle seized it up—held it tremblingly to the lamplight. It was a note hastily scribbled in pencil:

"Come to me as soon as you can. I will be waiting, Perle. I will never go without you.—BRIAN."

Her eyes filled. A new hope dawned in her heart. An Englishman's word was his bond. Brian would wait. He was waiting for her now! Was there a chance even yet?

Breathlessly Perle put out the lamp. She ran to the window. Opened the shutter an inch.

Hope died.

A German sentry stood posted at the gate. Another stood in the shadows at the top of the cliff path.

She was a prisoner just as surely as though she were shut up already in the dreaded concentration camp!

CHAPTER III

THE SACRIFICE PERLE MADE

THE dark night had gone. It was morning now.

Perle milked the cow and fed the chicks. She got little Tina her breakfast. She went about the work of the farmhouse. And all the time suspense was gnawing at her heart. And all she could see was the grey helmets of the sentries standing motionless at their posts outside.

What was going to happen? Why did the Nazis do nothing? Why this ominous quiet?

The hours dragged by till Perle's nerves were near to snapping. It was noon when the corporal came to her. He questioned and threatened her again, but he seemed to be keeping something back.

"Fraulein is sure she has nothing to tell me?" he said, grimly amiable.

"Quite sure!" Perle defied him.

His dry smile gave her new forebodings. Did it mean that Brian was captured? Had they discovered him? Was this why the Nazis were not bothering about her?

"At any rate, fraulein will tell me if these particulars are correct for my report to the Commandant," he went on, opening his notebook and reading from it. "'Fraulein Perle Vaarden. Living alone with her young sister Christina, aged five.' No one else in family?"

"Not till my father returns from England, after you Nazis have been thrown out of Norway!" Perle said fearlessly.

He glowered, but she noticed he still had an air of sardonic satisfaction as he strutted out.

Was it bluff? Just a bluff to make her believe Brian was captured? She clung to that hope doggedly.

It was late afternoon when another knock came to the door.

Perle was confronted by a gold-braided, monocled German officer. The Commandant! The military governor of the whole district. He had power of life and death over the population, but Perle gave

him the coolest welcome he'd ever known.

" Well ? " she said.

He strode into the kitchen, followed by the corporal's squad, who lined up at rigid attention by the door.

" Fraulein, an English airman is at large," the Commandant said distinctly. " You have helped him evade capture. For that offence I may yet deal with you leniently, on condition "—his eye glittered at her through his monocle—" on condition that you tell me where he is hiding ! "

A warm thrill rushed through Perle. Brian had not been captured ! New hope and courage fired her heart, and strengthened her defiance against these Nazi bullies he had fooled.

" Does the Fuehrer's Army need the help of a girl against one little Englishman, Herr Kommandant ? " she asked innocently. " I cannot tell you where he is hiding ! "

" You mean you will not ? "

" How could I know where he hides now ? The Englishman he is elusive, is he not ? And I have not been outside my door since yesterday, Herr Kommandant," sighed Perle. " Your brave soldiers would not let me go ! "

" Your duty is to tell what you know ! " he threatened her.

" My duty is to look after this little sister of mine," said Perle, and pretended to busy herself brushing Tina's hair.

" A very touching duty," observed the Commandant softly. " But I am afraid it is going to end now, fraulein ! "

" What do you mean ? " Perle began—then stopped.

At a sign from the officer, the corporal stepped forward and seized little Tina by the hand, drawing her away.

" I mean this," the Commandant said very distinctly. " Unless you tell me where the Englishman is hiding, your sister will be taken away from you, on my orders, and you will never see her again ! "

The shock drained Perle's strength away. Her voice came in a suffocated whisper :

" You wouldn't—you wouldn't do that ! "

" My orders will be carried out ! " he said coldly. " The choice is yours—to betray the Englishman, or to lose for ever this small sister of yours ! "

He meant it ! The room seemed to swim in front of Perle's eyes. She tottered forward, she was groping weakly to snatch little Tina into her arms. But the Commandant stood in her way ; the corporal thrust the child behind him, heedless of her fright.

" I will give you one minute to decide ! " came the officer's crisp voice.

Perle brushed a hand across her eyes that he shouldn't see her tears. He had forced the decision from her. There could be only one answer.

" You ask me to sacrifice my little sister —you know I could not do it," she heard herself whispering. " Promise, promise that she shall be safe—promise that you will not take her. Then you may take me. I will tell you all ! "

" You are wise," he observed grimly. " Speak, then—for the sake of the child. I am waiting ! "

The strength seemed to trickle back into Perle's veins. The worst danger was gone. Little Tina would be safe. But at the cost of herself, and Brian. It couldn't be different. Tina was little and defenceless, Tina mattered most in all the world. But now came another chill fear. Who would care for Tina if she—if Perle—were taken away ?

Then slowly that fear gave place to a wild, fantastic idea. It was fraught with a thousand risks, but it shaped itself in Perle's mind till suddenly she heard herself saying :

" I will take you to the Englishman, Herr Kommandant, if first I may send my little sister to safety—to her Granny's in the next village ! "

" As you wish ! " he said with a shrug. " But she goes alone—not with you ! "

Perle drew a deep breath and called little Tina to her. Here was her hardest task ! Would the mite understand, would Tina innocently give her away ?

" Tina, pet, you know your way to Granny's——" Perle whispered.

" Granny's ? " The child's eyes widened ; she knew she had no Granny.

" Where I took you last Sunday, when

we built the little grotto of stones—you remember your way, dear ? " Perle hurried on, her lips smiling but her heart pounding. " Do you think you could go there by yourself and take a note for me ? "

" Yes, I go ! " And now Tina's eyes lit up ; she remembered that jolly afternoon at the cave where Perle had taken her. " I'd like to see Granny's Grotto again ! " she said eagerly. " Won't you come too, Perle ? "

" Perhaps later on your sister will come," the Commandant put in dryly, but without suspicion.

Not a vestige of suspicion crossed his face as he watched Perle write a hurried note. It was just the sort of note she might have written to her Granny, not wishing to worry her, but seeking safety for the little sister.

" I am sending Tina to you, because the Herr Kommandant has called for me, and I do not know when I shall be back. Please take her with you and see she has all the love I wish for her, and do not worry about me.—PERLE."

She put the note in Tina's hand. She buttoned her little coat round her. She pushed into the pockets a few odds and ends put by for her comfort on the motor-boat's hazardous voyage. She hugged her convulsively and kissed her.

And then little Tina went out. And with an empty ache at her heart, Perle knew she would not see her again till the long war was over. But she was sending her to safety and happiness—sending her to their dad in England ! Her trust was in Brian. He would understand when he read her note. She prayed only that he would make his escape successfully, taking little Tina with him. Her own sacrifice would be worth it all.

" I am ready now ! " she said bravely to the Commandant.

He gave a stiff nod.

" You will conduct these soldiers to the Englishman's hiding-place. When he is safe in our hands," he said, " I will consider whether I will deal leniently with you, fraulein ! "

Perle didn't speak. She heard the Commandant drive away in his car, then silently she accompanied the corporal and his three men out of the farmhouse.

A whitish mist hung low over the sea. Perle saw it with thankfulness. That mist would make Brian's escape mercifully easier. He would not have to wait till nightfall. He would go now—as soon as Tina came to him with the note. But she would give him time, Perle told herself . . . she must play for time.

" Lead the way, fraulein," the corporal was saying with dour satisfaction. " Lead on to the Englischer ! "

" You have far yet to walk ; he is this way ! " Perle said.

She was leading the squad away from the bay, along the coast path on top of the cliff. They would neither hear nor see anything going on below. Her own steps were short—deliberately short. Their heavy feet had to slow down in time with her. Though they tried to force the pace, every step was taking them farther from their quarry had they but known it.

For nearly an hour they plodded on in the deepening dusk. Perle ignored the impatient mutterings of the Nazis till at last the corporal fired at her.

" Where is the Englischer ? "

" In the next bay ! " she murmured.

" Where ? " He was looking at her curiously.

" In Sandra Fiord ! " she had to answer, to disarm suspicion.

" Then why take the longest path ? " he demanded sharply. " We should have descended the cliff before this. Come ! "

He swung off to the right, taking a downhill path to the deserted beach of Sandra Fiord. Perle knew he would find it deserted. But her task was done. She would face her own fate now with a brave heart.

And suddenly a clamour broke out amongst the Nazis, and the corporal was shouting at her :

" What is this ? You fool us ! There is no Englischer here—no place to hide a rat ! "

Perle paused on the edge of the sandy waste. She met his furious eyes un-

flinchingly. Her face was white as the mist on the sea, yet she smiled with the calm of victory.

"Yes—I fooled you!" she said in a steady whisper. "You will never find the English pilot now!"

Guttural voices raged at her. She felt her wrists seized. A frightening helplessness, a frightening sense of her own danger enveloped her. But this was the sacrifice she had chosen—for little Tina's sake, and for the English airman, who was free again to fight the Nazi invaders. She was happy.

"Himmel! We shall find him! And for you there will be no mercy!" exploded the corporal.

Two of his men he sent off to continue the search in every nook and crevice. The third man—ominously—he despatched to the Commandant's headquarters.

"Tell Herr Kommandant the girl has cheated us. Report that I am holding her prisoner in the guard post. He will come! Ach, he will make her speak!"

The men vanished to obey their orders. Perle was left alone with the corporal. He twisted her wrist behind her back and marched her up the path of the cliff. No mercy! he had said. And no mercy could she hope for.

Far back along the road she had come stood a bleak wooden hut. The guard post!

"The collecting point for the concentration camp—you understand, fraulein?" And the corporal laughed thickly as he hustled her inside.

Perle did understand. Her neighbours, friends, some of her old schoolmates, had been herded in this same hut on their way to the grim concentration camp. She could see their initials scratched on the walls. Brave little messages of hope to the folks they left behind.

"Fraulein would perhaps like to add her name?" the corporal taunted her. "There iss little time before the Kommandant will be here!"

Little time! But there had been time enough for Brian to make good his escape with Tina. It was Perle's one consolation now, to give her the strength and courage she would so sorely need. She regretted nothing. But she felt frightened, she felt so lonely. She would be taken away from all she had known and loved. She could hear sounds even now approaching the hut.

Defiantly Perle faced the furious Nazi soldiers. "Yes—I fooled you," she confessed. "You will never find the English pilot now."

The sounds came closer.

Then a sudden crash at the window! Woodwork and glass splintering all about her! A figure leaping in! A boyish figure hurtling into the hut!

It was Brian! The young R.A.F. pilot!

Perle saw his fists lash out—saw the Nazi corporal go down on his back with a howl of stupefied agony. Next second she was swung off her feet. Brian was hoisting her out through the window. He jumped out after her. He was rushing her along the road to the cliff track.

" Last lap, Perle ! We'll make it ! " he was saying with a gasping laugh.

She had a crazy vision of a cart standing at the top of the track. One of her own farmcarts ! Brian fairly threw her into it. He swung up after her. He was rattling away down the slope with the horses going hell for leather.

" Head down, Perle ! That Nazi's shooting ! " he panted.

The crack of a rifle rang out from the road. She heard the corporal chasing, yelling, shooting wildly into the dark. His bullets went wide. The cart plunged round a bend and the cliffs gave safe cover.

" Bri-an—Bri-an, where are we going ? " Perle cried out.

" England ! "

" No—no ! " Frantically she tried to struggle up. " Where's my little sister ? Where's Tina ? "

" Safe aboard ! " he laughed, and gave a prod at the straw in the back of the cart. " Peep-bo, little sis ! "

A doll-like figure popped up from the straw, and there sat Tina, laughing with innocent delight.

Perle hadn't time to hug her before the cart grated on to the beach by Granny's Grotto. Brian tumbled them out in his arms.

A dim shape loomed up in the mist by the water's edge. It was the motor-boat. They were no sooner in than the engine was roaring, and the little craft leaping away through the waves.

" I guess we're all good sailors ! " breathed Brian. " We couldn't have a better night for the crossing ! "

Thanks to the concealing mist, the motor boat reached the open sea unnoticed, but their troubles were not over, for after a while they heard the sound of engines, and in the far distance they could see faintly the glimmer of a searchlight.

" It is the Nazis ! " whispered Perle. " They have sent out a boat to search for us."

Brian nodded, and laid a comforting hand on her arm.

" Don't worry," he said. " I can easily dodge out of the way of that searchlight, and in this fog they'll never find us."

He swung over the tiller, and next moment the distant light was blotted out by the thick banks of rolling mist. On roared the motor-boat. On and on. Their hearts in their mouths, they sat there. The minutes slipped by, and still there was no further sign of pursuit. Brian, leaning forward, smiled at Perle and her little sister.

" It's all right now," he declared. " We're safe. It's straight ahead for England."

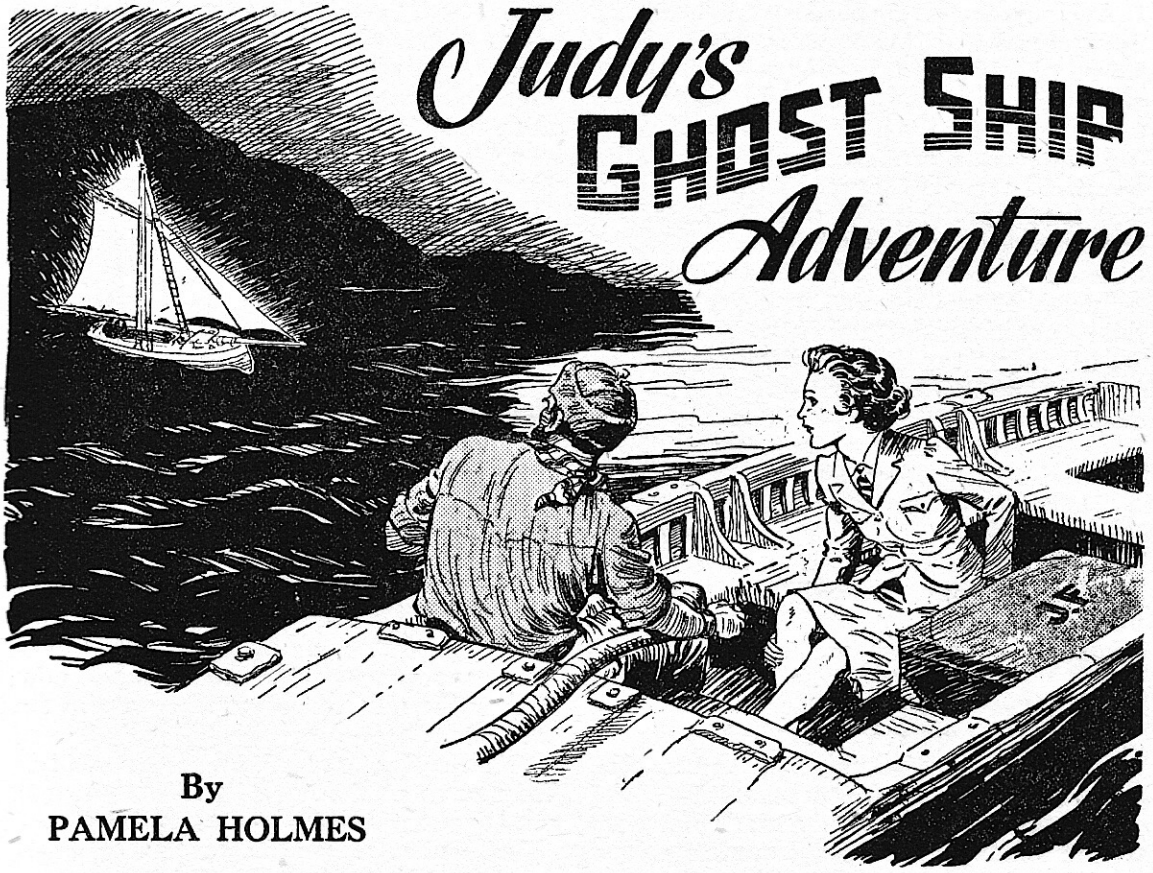
" For England ! " breathed Perle, and her heart beat with happiness, and her arm around her sister tightened its grip.

Little Tina laughed for joy because she knew she was going to her daddy. Perle looked up at Brian, her heart overflowing, her shining eyes telling him more than her lips could express.

" As your great British leader said, Bri-an——"

" ' Give me the tools and I'll finish the job '—eh, Perle ? " And his boyish hand closed over hers in warm gratitude, in a tender unspoken bond that would last for all time.

Judy's Ghost Ship Adventure



By
PAMELA HOLMES

Judy Fraser expected her island holiday to be full of excitement, and her expectations were realised—thanks to the spectral fishing-boat!

CHAPTER 1

THE SMASHED CAMERA

"THERE it is, lassie! Glengarry Island—and a prettier place you'll never find!"

The old ferryman pointed away across the blue sea to the dark line on the horizon. The attractive girl sitting in the bows of the launch gazed eagerly in the same direction, her grey eyes sparkling.

The Island of Glengarry!

Judy Fraser breathed the name excitedly, and clutched her suitcase tighter.

"This is going to be the most exciting holiday I've ever had," she said, thrilled by the prospect of spending a whole fortnight on a picturesque island off the West Coast of Scotland.

As the launch sped onwards, and Jeff, the ferryman, sucked his pipe, the dark streak grew larger, revealing rocky cliffs, a golden yellow beach, white breakers, and, beyond the shore, cloud-capped mountains.

Then Judy saw a few small wooden cottages nestling close together, and a little jetty where the fishing boats could tie up.

The old ferryman brought the launch expertly alongside, and Judy skipped ashore. A weatherbeaten crofter took her case from the boat, and in the broadest dialect asked where she wanted to go.

"Oh, I'm staying with Mr. and Mrs. McAllister—they're old friends of dad's," Judy explained excitedly.

"They're just coming, I ken," the crofter said, smiling.

A kindly looking couple were hurrying down to the jetty, and embraced Judy warmly. Then they set off for their cottage, which was built in a hollow high up among the cliffs.

Judy did more than justice to the beautifully cooked meal Mrs. McAllister had made ready, and then opened her suitcase. She searched through her belongings, and suddenly her face fell.

" Oh, bother ! I've left my purse at the railway station on the mainland," she said. " I left it in the cloakroom for safety while I strolled around waiting for the ferry. Oh, dear, I'll have to go back right away and fetch it. It's got all my money in it ! "

Mr. McAllister looked startled.

" But, Judy," he said, " it will be dark before you get back. Why not leave it until to-morrow ? "

" No, I'll get it to-day," Judy said firmly, tossing her head. " Someone might steal it before to-morrow ! "

She put on her hat and coat and ran down to the jetty.

Old Jeff Henderson was just ready to leave again. Judy jumped into the launch, and they set off for the mainland.

On arriving there, Judy made her way to the small station and found that the stationmaster had been looking after the purse for her. Judy thanked him, and returned to find the ferryman.

Jeff obviously didn't want to make the journey again, for it was now late in the afternoon, but Judy persuaded him, after giving him a liberal tip for his trouble.

Before they were half-way across the water the sun had sunk beyond the horizon and it was quite dark. Jeff seemed uneasy as he sat at the tiller.

" What's the matter ? " Judy sang out gaily. " Afraid of ghosts or something ? "

Jeff nodded gloomily.

" Aye, lassie, I am afraid of the speerits!" he said. " I'm not wanting to meet the Ghost Ship to-night ! "

" Ghost Ship ? " echoed Judy. " Sounds exciting ! What is it ? "

Jeff looked across the darkening sea before replying.

" It's a speerit that haunts these waters," he said solemnly. " Many years ago the fishing-boat ' Northwind ' was lost with all hands during a gale, when she ran ashore on the coast of the island. Since then, folks have seen her at night, a great red glow over her, and the skipper at the wheel ! No one knows where it comes from, or where it goes to, but they say it brings disaster to all who see it ! "

Judy shivered a little, in spite of herself. Then she laughed again.

" Well, let's hope the ' Northwind ' isn't making any trips to-night," she said cheerfully. " Never mind, Jeff—we'll soon be there."

Old Jeff stayed silent as the little vessel ploughed on towards the island. It was now quite dark, but he seemed to know exactly where he was. Judy guessed that he had been ferrying the islanders across to the mainland for many years.

A cold wind had sprung up, and Judy wrapped her coat round her more warmly as she gazed across the heaving waters. They were approaching the island now, though the cliffs could not be seen in the darkness.

" Hallo, the moon's coming up already,' Judy said suddenly. " Doesn't it look bright to-night ? "

Jeff looked across the waters, to where a bright glow was beginning to appear. He seemed puzzled.

" That's the wrong quarter for the moon to appear, lassie," he grunted. " And it looks a wee bit too glarin' for that."

They watched the glow appear brighter. Old Jeff stiffened, and gave a hoarse shout. " Mercy be ! It's the ' Northwind ' ! "

Judy sat bolt upright and watched the glow coming nearer.

She could see now that it was indeed a small fishing-boat. There was an eerie crimson glow over the masts and sails, as though the deck was on fire, and silhouetted against the glare, Judy could see a hunched figure sitting motionless at the wheel !

In spite of her strong nerves, she felt a thrill run down her spine.

The ghostly craft came nearer and nearer, making no sound.

Old Jeff was muttering fearfully, trying

to urge more and more speed out of the launch. Judy kept her eyes on the apparition, fascinated.

" It's going to run us down ! " Jeff cried.

The ghostly ship was certainly making straight for them, moving rapidly through the spume-topped waves.

And then, without the slightest warning, it disappeared !

One moment it was there, the next—it had simply vanished !

Judy drew in a deep breath.

" Golly ! Did we really see that ? " she asked. " Or did I imagine it all ? "

" That was the Ghost Ship, an' no mistake," the old ferryman assured her. " Praise be, we're nearly there. I'm staying on the island the night, too. I'm not going back until daylight ! "

They landed safely, and Judy, bidding Jeff good-night, ran up to the dark cottage, where she told the McAllisters the story of her adventure. They listened gravely, and nodded. It appeared that everyone on the island knew of the Ghost Ship.

But Judy was too tired to think about it for long, and she was soon sound asleep between the fresh sheets.

In the morning the day dawned bright and clear, and Judy was up early, eager to start exploring. She set out to walk across the cliffs.

There were no real roads, only rough tracks, and everywhere she saw flocks of sheep, whose wool the islanders spun into the famous Scots plaids.

Judy heard nothing all the morning but the bleating of the sheep, the cries of the innumerable birds that made their homes in the cliffs, and the steady roar of the long grey rollers breaking on the rocky shores.

In the afternoon she set out in the opposite direction, sometimes encountering a shepherd or crofter cutting peat, and exchanged cheery greetings Already she was beginning to feel the good effects of the strong sea air.

Then, scrambling over the cliff-tops, she found herself looking down into a small bay. The scene was wildly beautiful. There was not a house to be seen, nor a human being anywhere—only the sea-birds wheeling and screeching overhead, and a few stray sheep grazing perilously near the edge of the cliffs.

A small fishing-boat was anchored in the bay—the sole sign of life. It seemed to be deserted, unless the crew were below.

Judy's eyes sparkled as she thought what a grand photo the scene would make. Fortunately, she had brought her folding camera with her.

She whipped it out, and carefully focused it, so that the fishing boat would

"Who could have done it ? " gasped Judy, staring at her smashed camera. Had this incident anything to do with the mystery of the Ghost Ship ?

be in the centre of the snap. Then, click ! went the shutter, and she put it back in its case.

A few minutes later she saw a tall tree growing on the very top of the cliffs, its topmost branches high up above the roaring waves.

" Golly, what a marvellous view of the other islands I could get from up there," Judy thought. " Might even be able to see the mainland, too ! "

So that it should not get in the way,

she left her camera in its case on a flat rock not far away, and began climbing the tree.

Judy had always been a tom-boy, and climbing trees was no new experience for her. Besides, this one was easy, with lots of strong branches jutting out to afford footholds.

She climbed a good way up it, and then made herself comfortable among the branches, enjoying the wide views. She could see some of the other near-by islands, and far away, the distant outline of the Scottish coast itself. Far out at sea were a few fishing-boats, dipping in the swell of the waves, and there was also a small steamer making for the mainland.

After ten minutes or so, Judy reluctantly descended, slithering down to the ground. Luckily she had brought some old tweeds with her, so that a few scratches didn't matter.

Then she returned to the flat rock to get her camera.

But it had gone!

Startled, Judy looked around. She had heard no one approach, though someone might possibly have done so while she was scanning the horizon from the top of the tree.

And then she saw something lying near the rock. It was the camera. It had been taken out of its case and smashed to fragments!

"Oh! Who could have done it?" Judy muttered furiously. She picked up the pieces but the camera was ruined beyond repair.

Judy felt she could have stamped in vexation. She set off towards the cottage again, puzzled and annoyed. On the way, she passed the little bay again.

She glanced down into it, and then came to a halt.

The fishing-boat that was there had gone!

Judy looked out to sea, but there was no sign of the vessel. Nor was it hugging the coast, for Judy had an excellent view of a long stretch of coast from where she was standing.

The boat had vanished as though the waves had swallowed it up.

"Just like the Ghost Ship last night!" Judy thought.

Unbidden, the thought of the Ghost Ship had flashed into her mind. It was ridiculous, of course, but—could there be any connection?

What if the boat in the bay, and the Ghost Ship, were one and the same!

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY FISHERMAN

JUDY hesitated, turning the mystery over in her mind. Then she came to a decision. She would go down to the bay and see if she could find a clue to the puzzle.

For some time she searched fruitlessly for a way down to the deserted beach. At last she found a narrow, twisting path winding down through a gap between the cliffs.

She descended cautiously, slithering now and then among the loose rocks and pebbles.

At last she reached the beach, and gazed around keenly. She began searching among the boulders, hardly knowing what she was looking for. But there was nothing to be seen.

She moved along, still searching everywhere, and now and then looking out to sea, in case the fishing-boat should reappear. But still there was no clue to be found.

She suddenly found a small cave, half hidden among the rocks. Judy knew that the islands were honeycombed with caves, some of them filled with water, others dry and sandy.

She went boldly into the cave, but it was quite empty, save for a few strips of seaweed, that had been washed up at high tide.

Disappointed, Judy came out into the bright sunshine again, and then halted abruptly. A young fisherman was standing on the beach a few yards away, regarding her questioningly.

"Oh, hallo," Judy said, not knowing quite what to say. "I didn't see you approach."

"I've just come down the cliff path," the fisherman explained, in a broad Scots accent. "Are ye lookin' for something?"

" Yes—er, no," Judy said hastily. " I thought I saw a fishing-boat in the bay just now, but it seems to have gone."

" Well, ye won't find it in yon cave," the fisherman declared. " I expect it's awa' round the coast by now."

Judy agreed with him, though secretly she couldn't see how it had managed to sail away without her seeing it. There seemed to be no point in searching the bay further, especially with the fisherman there, and she turned away towards the cluster of cottages.

" This is no place for a young lass," the fisherman said, eyeing her keenly. " If ye fell down the cliff or something, days might pass before anyone came this way."

" Oh, I can look after myself," Judy said, rather resenting his tone.

" Weel, I shouldna come here if I were you," he said, and made off towards one of the cottages.

From Mrs. McAllister Judy learned that the fisherman's name was Ben McWhirter. She decided not to say anything about her smashed camera for the present.

During the evening a daring idea suddenly came to Judy. Why not slip out after dark and explore the bay then? Judy felt sure someone hadn't wanted her near the place, or why had the camera been broken? And why didn't Ben McWhirter want her to visit the bay?

She waited excitedly until the McAllisters had gone to bed, and then slipped out of her room, warmly wrapped up, and softly left the cottage.

There was not a soul about, and Judy set off along the rough track, finding her way by the faint moonlight. Fifteen minutes' walk brought her to the little bay, and again she made her way along the cliff-top.

She reached a sheltered spot and decided to wait, in case anything should happen.

Minutes passed and Judy grew cramped. She began to think it was all a wild-goose

"I wouldna use that boat if I were you!" declared a gruff voice, and, turning, Judy found herself confronted by Ben McWhirter, the strange young fisherman.

chase, and she had let the romantic atmosphere of the island turn her head.

Then, suddenly, she saw a faint light down on the beach, moving among the rocks.

Tense with excitement, Judy watched. She could hear nothing, and saw only the light dancing up and down. Of course, it might be a shepherd searching for some missing sheep. But Judy felt sure there was more in it than that.

She stepped forward only a few feet from the cliff-top to get a better view. Then she began moving cautiously along the rough ground, following the dancing light, which was now receding from her.

And suddenly, without warning, the ground seemed to fall away from under her feet and Judy felt herself falling! She felt something strike her head as she hit the ground again, and then she lost consciousness.

How long she lay there Judy didn't know, but she returned to consciousness to hear a soothing voice. Bright sunlight was pouring down, making her blink dazedly, and someone was holding cool water to her lips.

She sat up and stared around bewilderedly.

Then she realised what had happened. In the darkness she had fallen over into a dip in the ground, striking her head on a boulder. Someone was bending over, trying to revive her.

It was Ben McWhirter, the young fisherman!

"Feelin' better, lassie?" he asked gruffly, offering a flask of water.

Judy sipped it gratefully, and scrambled to her feet. She was feeling better now, though her head was aching.

"Have you just found me?" she asked dizzily.

"Aye, I was just comin' along the track, when I caught sight of you lying there," he said. "Looks as though you had been there all night."

His tone was questioning, and Judy realised that she had better make some explanation.

"I—I went for a moonlight walk, and must have fallen down here," she said.

"Ah, weel, I warned ye against coming around these parts," Ben said. "It's dangerous for a lassie, and I hope ye'll tak' the lesson to heart."

With Ben's assistance, Judy made her way back to the McAllisters' cottage. Her hostess was already anxiously making enquiries, having discovered Judy's absence, and Judy explained again what had happened, feeling a twinge of remorse at having caused these good people such anxiety.

Ben left them abruptly, and went off to his nets. Judy stared after him. How was it that he had been there so early—for few of the crofters were about yet? And why was he so anxious that she should not stray near the little bay? Was there something there he wanted to keep hidden?

Judy felt baffled. Something queer was going on in the island, and she meant to get to the bottom of it, but still she had no clue, except that the bay came into it.

The night's adventure had shaken Judy more than she had realised at first, and Mrs. McAllister insisted on her lying down to rest all morning. By the afternoon she was her old self again.

Mr. McAllister smiled as he saw the colour returning to her cheeks.

"Now, lassie, here's something for ye to do this afternoon," he said, in his kindly way. "The sea's like glass, and the sun's shinin'. Why not take a boat out, and try rowing around the coast? Ye won't be able to fall into holes then! Only don't go too far out, in case ye get into deeficulties."

"That's a grand idea!" Judy cried, her eyes shining. "I love rowing, and it's ideal for a trip!"

She set off for the jetty, where there were a number of rowing-boats belonging to the fishermen, some of whom were chatting and smoking.

Judy looked over the various boats, and decided that she liked a gaily painted one, bearing the name "Pride of the Isles."

"Please, whose boat is that down there?" she asked the bystanders. "I'd like to borrow it for the afternoon."

"That belongs to Angus McPhee," one of the crofters replied. "He's awa' over

on the mainland now, but he won't mind if you borrow it."

Judy thanked him, and pushed the boat down into the still water by the jetty. She was about to step into it when a voice hailed her.

" I wouldna use that boat if I were you, lassie ! "

She turned, and saw Ben McWhirter, the young fisherman.

" Oh ! Why not ? " Judy asked, rather coldly.

" Angus may be comin' back soon, an' he may want to use it," the fisherman explained.

" Well, then what about this one ? " Judy demanded, pointing to a similar boat tied up to the jetty.

" No ; that leaks a bit," said Ben McWhirter. " It isna safe."

" Well, that one over there looks quite new," said Judy, pointing to a third.

" Ye might have that," Ben admitted grudgingly. " But I don't like the look o' the weather. Storm's brewing, I reckon."

Several of the crofters had been listening to the conversation, and now one of them stepped forward, smiling broadly, pipe in hand.

" Ben's tryin' to put you off, lassie," he chuckled. " There won't be any bad weather to-day, trust ma word for it. You tak' that boat—it's ma own, ye ken—and have a good time. Awa' wi' ye, Ben, for a Dismal Daniel ! "

The strange fisherman turned on his heel, and strode away, muttering. Judy, with a grateful smile to the crofter, got into the boat and pushed off with one of the oars.

As she bent to the oars energetically, she wondered why Ben McWhirter had been so anxious that she shouldn't use any of the boats. Might it be that he was afraid she would row round to the little bay ?

But Judy had had enough of the bay for the time being, and determined to enjoy herself. The weather was perfect, and she hardly noticed how the time flew. The boat skimmed over the gently heaving water, and now and then she waved to the crews of passing fishing-boats, as they made their way to the jetty to land their catch.

The sun dipped lower towards the rim of the horizon, and still Judy rowed on, always keeping well within sight of the coast, however.

Then she noticed a slight wind begin to spring up. It ruffled the water, making little waves and splashes of foam. Clouds were coming up, too, casting shadows across the sunlit sea.

Judy took little notice at first, and then she began to realise that the wind was getting stronger.

" Better not take chances," she thought. " I've been in too many scrapes already ! "

She turned the boat towards the shore, and was surprised to notice that she was quite a long way out. The boat must have been carried along by a strong current, and she had travelled faster than it had seemed.

Now it was quite an effort to pull, especially with the wind increasing all the time. The sky was rapidly filling up with cloud, and Judy remembered Ben McWhirter's warning about a storm. It looked as if he was going to be right after all.

She pulled strongly, but the boat was beginning to rock rather uncomfortably. And suddenly her feet slipped along the bottom of the boat. She lost her balance, and went full length along the bottom.

In the momentary confusion she let go one of the oars. It disappeared over the side and in a moment floated away out of reach !

Judy, with a cry of dismay, sat up and tried to steer the boat round with the remaining oar, so that she could pick the other up. But the oar, caught in a strong current, had floated right away from the boat already, and despite her most strenuous efforts Judy could not reach it.

She found herself sitting in the rocking boat, still holding the remaining oar, while the current tried to carry her out to sea again. The wind was now howling, a trickle of rain was beginning to fall, and it was quickly growing dark.

Judy was adrift !

CHAPTER III

THE GHOST SHIP'S SECRET

FRANTICALLY Judy started to row towards the island, using her one oar as a paddle. But she could make hardly any progress.

Sometimes the shore seemed to be getting nearer, at other times it seemed farther away. Judy was getting tired and hungry, and the rain, which was now coming down quite steadily, was making her uncomfortably wet.

The small boat was lurching as the rising waves lifted it, and she wondered how long it would be before the motion would make her seasick!

Judy shuddered, and hastily put that thought out of her mind. At any rate, the McAllisters knew where she had gone and would send a boat out to look for her. Or perhaps old Jeff, the ferryman, would be coming across from the mainland and pick her up.

Judy's spirits rose at the thought, only to sink again as she realised that it was almost night, and Jeff wouldn't make the trip in the darkness, for fear of the Ghost Ship.

The Ghost Ship!

Suppose that came along again—Judy scoffed at the idea of ghost ships, and felt sure there was something more than a ghost behind this one, but it had certainly looked uncanny enough. If it were to appear tonight, when she was helpless in the drifting boat——

Judy swallowed grimly, and worked harder than ever. She seemed to be making more headway. If only she could keep it up she might yet reach the island safely.

But she was tiring fast. And the wind was getting worse!

An hour and a half had passed since she had lost the oar, according to her wrist-watch, and it was quite dark—a black, wet night, with only the glimmer of moonlight breaking through the clouds. The weather had changed with amazing swiftness.

And then—Judy stiffened.

Somewhere over towards the coast, a faint glow had appeared!

It grew more distinct, and her heart chilled as her fears were confirmed. The ghost of the "Northwind" had appeared again!

"Golly, it's now or never," she panted, straining feverishly against her oar.

Somehow Judy couldn't tear her gaze from the eerie glow.

Now she could see the outlines of the masts and sails, and again there was that still, hunched figure at the wheel. It was coming towards her, swift and silent.

On and on, with never a sound save for the sighing wind!

Judy was really scared now, though she refused to admit it. Panting hard, she tugged at her oar, feeling sure she would soon reach the dark, bleak shores of the island.

But the Ghost Ship was bearing down on her. It was no more than a quarter of a mile off, and approaching swiftly.

Judy realised that her efforts were useless. She sat still, striving to get her breath back, and waited.

Nearer and nearer came the apparition, and still the silent figure at the wheel didn't move.

And then—Judy's eyes gleamed excitedly. It was so near now that she could see every feature clearly. There was a huge patch in the mainsail—and she had seen just such a patch before! There had been an exactly similar patch in the sail on the fishing-boat that had disappeared from the bay!

"This isn't a ghost," Judy thought fiercely. "And I'm jolly well going to find out what the game is!"

The still figure at the wheel suddenly moved, and Judy heard a faint shout. He had just seen her little boat!

The vessel, with that strange glow all about it, came alongside, and Judy found herself looking up into the angry features of a strange fisherman, while her boat bumped against the sides of a very real fishing smack.

The man threw her a rope, and Judy tied her boat with it, and then scrambled on the deck. At once she realised the reason for the strange glow. It was simply a coloured electric light, run from a

battery, fixed so that it spread a glow over the masts and sails!

As the man who had been at the wheel helped her to her feet, two or three more fishermen came out of the cabin, staring at her threateningly.

"It's that girl who tried to photograph us in the bay the other day," the first man growled. "Lost an oar, it seems. Well, now we've got her we'll have to hold her for the present."

"Where are you taking me?" Judy demanded furiously.

"You'll see!" the skipper returned with a sneer.

He moved a switch, and instantly the glow disappeared, leaving the boat in pitch darkness. Now Judy could hear the soft throbbing of an engine. No wonder the boat was unusually fast!

To Judy's dismay the strong current carried the oar out of reach. She was adrift!

They made straight towards the shores of the island, towing her rowing-boat at the end of the rope. And then Judy realised they were entering the little bay!

The boat seemed to be steering straight for the rocks, and Judy felt certain they would run ashore. Then she saw a gap in the rocks, invisible from the shore, and just wide enough to take the boat.

The skipper steered the boat into the gap, and so they passed into a large cave, the front part filled with water, the rest high and dry.

They jumped ashore, and Judy followed.

"Now, young lady," the skipper growled. "I'm sorry you're going to be uncomfortable, but you've brought it on yourself. Tie her up, Jim, so that she can't get away."

Judy struggled hard, but one of the burly fishermen managed to tie her hands and feet, so that she was helpless. They left her lying on some sacking on the dry floor at the end of the cave, and then began to unload boxes from the fishing-boat.

Judy was in despair for a few minutes. Then her spirit came to the top, and she began planning to escape.

She stared around in the darkness, wondering if there were any other entrances. A cool current of air fanned her face, coming down from the roof, and Judy wondered where it could come from.

The explanation struck her suddenly. There must be a hole in the cliffs, like a chimney, leading down into the cave!

If only she could get free of her bonds, she might try to climb up.

She wriggled around, and then encountered a sharp-edged piece of rock, one of many which lay scattered on the sandy floor. Swiftly Judy rubbed the rope binding her wrists along the sharp edge.

The men were all in the cabin of the boat now, having finished unloading the boxes.

Jim, the man who had bound her, had not taken very much trouble with his work, and suddenly Judy felt the rope give, as the sharp piece of rock sawed through it. She freed her hands, and undid the rope around her ankles in a moment.

Her spirits rising again, Judy stood up cautiously, and felt upwards. The roof was only just above her head, and with searching fingers she felt for the air-hole.

She found it—a circular shaft about two feet wide. There was a rough, natural ledge there, with which she could get a grip.

With a heave, Judy swung herself up, and got a foothold inside the shaft. Then she began to scramble upwards, making use of rough ledges as footholds.

It was a nightmare journey Judy would never forget, but at last she emerged from the top of the shaft, to find herself near the tall tree she had climbed before, when her camera had been smashed.

She scrambled breathlessly to her feet and set off towards the cottages, intending to rouse the crofters at once. But before she had gone a couple of yards a torch suddenly flashed in her face, and a hand gripped her shoulder!

With a cry Judy stopped, and found herself staring into the face of Ben McWhirter, the fisherman!

"I thought so!" he grunted. "What have you been up to? Have ye been oot for another midnight stroll?"

Judy said nothing for a moment, striving to collect her thoughts. Was Ben one of the gang who had captured her, or not? He was looking at her keenly.

"Come now, lassie," he said. "Ye wouldna ha' been in a cave to-night, down by the shore, eh?"

Judy nodded silently. He caught her firmly by the shoulder.

"Show me where it is," he said briskly.

"No!" Judy said defiantly, trying to break away.

He tightened his grip, and pushed her down the twisting path towards the beach.

Judy, tired out, found she had no strength to resist.

They reached the beach, and moved along the shore. Judy knew roughly the position of the gap, but she could not see it until she was almost on top of it. Then she saw that there was a great boulder which appeared to have been moved to one side, disclosing the opening to the cave.

Judy was in despair. Ben McWhirter would take her back to her captors, she was certain, and she was too utterly exhausted to escape.

But he let go his hold, and stepped quietly up to the boulder. He put his shoulder to it, and, to Judy's amazement, it rolled into position, completely blocking the entrance!

Startled cries came from within as the men heard the boulder moving, and Ben smiled down at Judy.

"We'll just find the shaft you escaped from, and block that," he said, "and then they'll be nicely bottled up until the police come to fetch them in the morning!"

Judy's mind reeled under this surprise. And with another shock she realised that there was now no trace of a Scots accent in Ben's voice.

"But—but I thought you were——" Her voice trailed away.

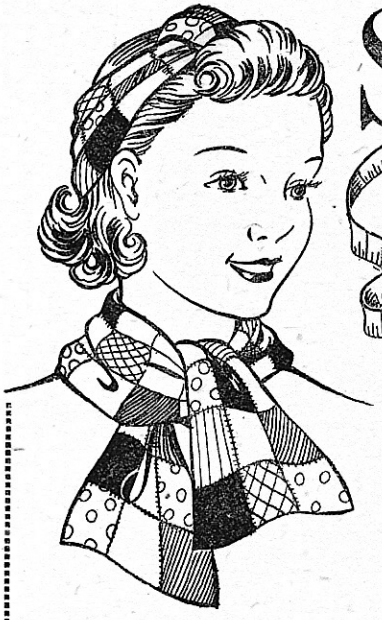
"You thought I was one of the gang?" the "fisherman" chuckled. "No, I've been on their trail for a long time. They're smugglers, you see! But I couldn't find their hide-out. I didn't want you near the bay in case anything happened to you. But thanks to you, Judy, we've caught them nicely."

Next day the police rounded up the smugglers, and thanked Judy for her part in the capture.

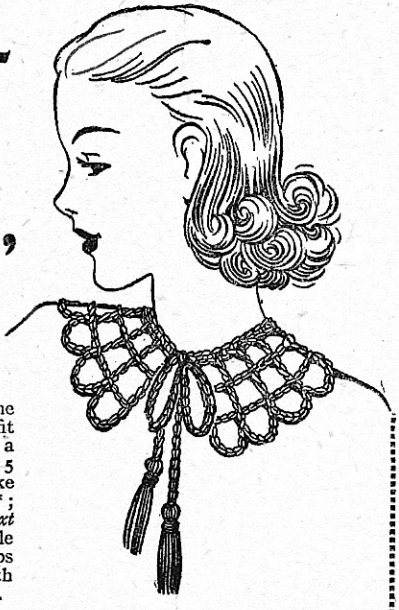
For the remainder of her holiday Judy went bathing, rambling, and boating with "Ben"—whose real name turned out to be Dick—and when the time came to leave the island, Judy went with regret.

THE END

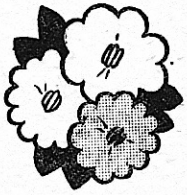
SMART— *and* USEFUL, TOO!

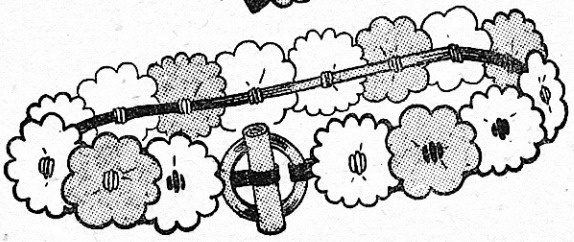


This gay patchwork scarf is made from 2½-inch squares stitched together. You can use either scraps of material, or knit the squares in odd pieces of wool. They can be joined either with overstitch or a fancy feather-stitch. A head-scarf can be made to match.



You can crochet the collar on the right very easily. Make a chain to fit your neck, turn with 2 chain; do a row of double crochet; turn with 5 chain; treble into 2nd stitch.* Make 2 chain, then treble into 2nd stitch*; continue to end from * to *. *Next row:* Make 3 chain between treble stitches; for final row make loops of 7 chain. Finish off the collar with two contrasting or matching tassels.

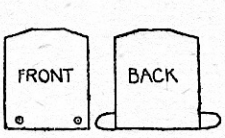


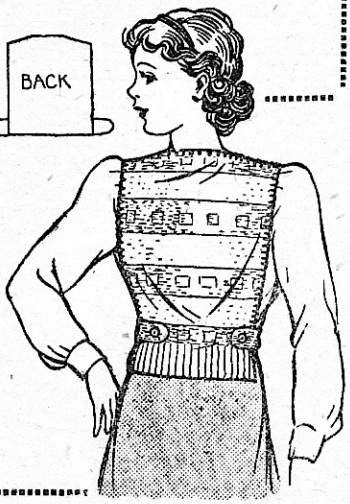


To make the pretty belt on the left, cut flower-shaped pieces from different-coloured felts — old hats would be ideal—then stitch them as shown to a strip of black tape. One end of the tape is secured to a suitably sized ring; the other to a small roll of felt which, when thrust through the ring, acts as a novel fastener.

A button-hole can be made to match.

For a frock that is too tight, make an opening right down the centre and insert a strip from another dress. Make pockets, collar and cuffs to match, and then no one will ever guess the dress has been altered. Finish with a new belt.





A cosy jerkin to wear under your coat in winter can be made from the backs of two old woollen jumpers. Crochet or buttonhole round the raw edges, and make little flaps for fastening, as shown.

The TRAIL of FALSE CLUES

An intriguing mystery story, featuring Noel Raymond, the famous young detective.

By

PETER LANGLEY

CHAPTER I

THE RIVAL DETECTIVES

"THIS looks like the place!" murmured Noel Raymond, as he slowed his car outside the massive iron gates and glanced at the name inscribed on the pillar.

"Elmwood Lodge."

The young detective smiled quizzically as he glanced at the high wall surrounding the estate—a wall embellished with broken glass and barbed wire.

"Umph!" he commented. "The professor's taking no risks. I wonder what's on his mind?"

He descended from his car and tugged at the rusty bell-pull. It was some time before his ring was answered; then a dour-faced manservant appeared and scrutinised him suspiciously.

The servant's manner changed as Noel produced his card.

"Professor Tremayne is expecting you, sir," he said. "Will you drive in?"

"Queer sort of establishment," thought Noel, as he pressed his foot on the accelera-

tor. "More like a fortified castle than a private house!"

But to his surprise he found Professor Tremayne to be a very pleasant and genial man—a trifle absent-minded in his manner, but in no wise eccentric.

He came straight to the point as he ushered Noel into his study.

"You may be surprised at the precautions I am taking, Mr. Raymond," he said, "but I felt that they were necessary. As I mentioned in my letter, I am engaged on some highly important experimental work on behalf of the Government—work in which secrecy is essential."

Noel raised his eyebrows.

"Surely you don't anticipate that spies would make an attempt to——"

"Oh, dear me, no!" interrupted the professor, smiling. "Nothing like that. My notes, diagrams and apparatus would be completely useless to anyone but myself. What I am afraid of, Mr. Raymond, is that the daring burglar who has twice broken into my house and robbed me of certain valuables might make another attempt, and perhaps carry off or destroy some vital papers or apparatus at the same time. I read of a similar case some time ago."

The young detective nodded thoughtfully, a gleam of interest in his eyes.

"So your house has been burgled—in spite of your precautions?"

"Twice within the last fortnight," replied the professor. "I have lost several valuable objects of art. I'm a bit of a collector in my spare time. The stolen objects were in the sitting-room adjoining my laboratory. You may perhaps understand my anxiety."

"I certainly do," replied Noel. "I suppose you have no suspicions as to who the thief might be?"

"None at all," replied the professor. "The local police are baffled. But my niece, Julie——"

At that instant the study door was thrown open impetuously, to admit an auburn-haired, very attractive girl, whose eyes were dancing with excitement.

"Uncle," she exclaimed, "I've found another clue! It——"

She broke off abruptly, her cheeks flaming, as she caught sight of Noel.

"I—I'm sorry!" she faltered. "I didn't know——"

"It's all right, my dear," put in the professor, smiling. "This is Mr. Raymond, the London detective. Mr. Raymond—my niece, Julie Vardon!"

Noel bowed, but to his surprise Julie Vardon drew back with a little gasp of disappointment.

"Uncle!" she exclaimed reproachfully, turning to the professor. "Why—why didn't you tell me before? Now you've spoilt everything!"

"Ahem!" remarked the professor, somewhat abashed. "I'm afraid the matter completely slipped my mind, Julie." He glanced apologetically at Noel.

"When I've deciphered this message," Julie said, "I'm going to lay a trap for the thief!" Noel frowned, for he realised that it was impossible to dissuade the headstrong girl from carrying out her dangerous plan.

" The fact is, Mr. Raymond, my niece prides herself on being something of a sleuth—an amateur, you understand. She has been handling this inquiry for me."

" I see ! " said Noel, a twinkle of understanding in his eyes. " I'm rather cutting in on your preserves, Miss Vardon. But surely—two heads are better than one, at times, and we could pool our discoveries ? "

" I—I'm sorry ! " the girl said at once, holding out her hand frankly. " It was stupid of me to take it like that. But, you see, I was getting on so well. I feel certain that I'm on the point of getting on the track of the thief. So what I'll do," she went on eagerly, " is to tell you what I've discovered and let you draw your own conclusions."

Noel suppressed a smile.

" That'll be fine," he said. " Shall we start at the scene of the burglary ? "

The professor led the way into a spacious, attractively furnished room adjoining his laboratory. The walls were lined with curios and objects of art ; thick Oriental rugs covered the polished parquet floor.

As they entered a woman appeared from the door opposite—a rather hard-faced woman, wearing a dress of rustling black silk and carrying a bunch of keys.

" Ah, Mrs. Parsons ! " said the professor. " Will you tell Mr. Baxter that I should like him to come to the laboratory to take down some notes ? Thank you ! "

The housekeeper swept out of the room with a slight toss of her head.

" Mrs. Parsons, I should explain, is a very trustworthy woman," remarked the professor, " though a trifle short-tempered at times. Her husband is employed as chauffeur-gardener. He has charge of the gates."

Julie plucked Noel by the sleeve, drawing him aside.

" A queer couple ! " she whispered, with a warning glance. " I'm keeping my eye on them. I'll tell you later. S-sh ! "

Noel managed to look suitably grave.

A brisk-looking man had entered the room, a portfolio under his arm.

" You sent for me, sir ? " he asked.

" Er—yes, Baxter. I should like you to take down some notes for me," replied the professor. " We'll leave these two young people to proceed with their investigations."

He and the secretary entered the adjoining room, closing the door.

" Mr. Baxter has been very helpful," explained Julie in a whisper. " It was he who suggested to uncle that I should take up the case. Shall I start explaining ? "

" Please ! " said Noel. His practised gaze scanned the room. " I take it that the stolen curios were removed from the shelf on the right of the window ? "

Julie glanced at him in a startled fashion—and then she smiled.

" Of course ! You saw those marks in the dust. That's easy ! Two things were stolen last night—a heavy silver candlestick and a Chinese bowl. The thief came in through the window, and left the same way. I can also give you a description of him."

" Eh ? " demanded Noel, taken aback.

Julie laughed.

" I thought that would surprise you. Listen ! The thief is tall—exceptionally tall and agile. He wears size nine in shoes, and has expensive tastes. He's either visited the house on some previous occasion—or is in touch with someone who knows it well. What do you think of that ? "

She glanced at Noel triumphantly.

The young detective whistled softly.

" You've certainly got the description pat," he replied, regarding her quizzically. " Now, let me see if I can discover how you reached your conclusions."

He stepped back from the window, glancing at the shelves.

" You say the thief is a tall man—and agile ? The suggestion being that he must have been exceptionally tall—in order to reach the curios from that shelf while standing on the floor.

" If he entered and left by the window, he must have been very agile. I notice faint, muddy footprints on the parquet floor, and I take it that you have measured them ? Good ! You certainly don't let much escape you, young lady ! "

Noel bent again to examine the muddy footprints. There was a rather curious expression in his eyes as he straightened himself.

"And what about the expensive tastes?" he asked.

"I thought that would puzzle you," declared Julie. "Look!"

Opening her handbag she took out a half-burnt cigarette of a rather expensive brand.

"I found this on the floor, near the window," she explained.

Noel examined it gravely.

"How did you know this brand was expensive?" he asked.

"My brother smokes them," replied Julie, "and he's got awfully extravagant tastes. Donald's in Scotland on business," she added.

"Well, you certainly seem to have got your case cut and dried," said Noel. "But one rather curious fact has occurred to me. The thief certainly seems to have gone out of his way to leave tracks deliberately, doesn't he?"

He held out the half-burnt cigarette.

"Take that, for example. Do you notice anything peculiar about it?" he asked.

"No," replied the girl, frowning a little. "There aren't any finger-prints, because I've looked."

"I don't mean finger-prints," said Noel. "I mean the way it is burnt. It was smoked to within a fraction of an inch of the maker's name, and then extinguished."

"What of it?" asked Julie.

"I don't know," replied the young detective thoughtfully. "But it seems a strange oversight on the thief's part to leave so incriminating a piece of evidence lying about!"

Julie tossed her head.

"If you are suspicious of my clues, why don't you look for some of your own?" she asked.

Noel accepted the girl's rebuff good-humouredly.

"Let me try," he said.

He barely glanced at the window, but crossed the room towards the door. He bent to examine the seat of a chair.

"The scratches on this leather seem to have been made recently," he remarked; "almost as if someone might have been standing on it."

He straightened himself, glancing at a framed photograph on a near-by table—a group of young men in football attire. One of them, in the centre, stood head and shoulders above the rest.

"Who's the good-looking young fellow," inquired Noel casually as he picked up the frame—"the one in the centre?"

The girl's expression softened.

"That's my brother Don," she said, "the one I was telling you about who's in Scotland. He's awfully keen on sports. He's got a good job, too—connected with the Government."

Noel thoughtfully replaced the portrait; his eyes were grave and rather troubled.

"Have you searched outside the house?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Of course," said Julie. "It was the first thing I did. The ground's too dry for footprints, but I found traces where someone had been hiding in the bushes."

"Will you show me?" asked Noel quietly.

Only too willingly the girl complied, leading the way from the house. Noel followed, the troubled expression on his face more pronounced.

Every indication helped to confirm his startling theory—that the clues found by Julie had been laid deliberately!

But the girl sleuth would be affronted if he suggested it. So for the time being he decided to keep his own counsel.

As they halted in the grounds, Julie pointed up to the window of the drawing-room.

"You see," she said. "An agile man could reach the window by way of the ivy. I'm convinced that he must have hidden himself in the grounds, and possibly he's found some secret way in."

Noel was staring at the bushes surrounding the house; he noticed unmistakable traces of the undergrowth having been recently trampled.

As he strolled forward his keen eyes detected something caught up in the shrubbery. It was a man's hat.

He took a swift step towards it, but Julie, whose eyes were equally sharp, sprang in front of him.

" I saw it first ! " she gasped.

But, with a swift gesture, Noel's agile fingers pounced on the hat and jerked something from the lining before he allowed her to take it from him.

Crimson with mingled indignation and suppressed excitement, Julie held the battered hat protectively.

" You—you're just jealous ! " she scoffed. " You're afraid I'll solve the mystery before you. I think you're mean ! "

The young detective's lips tightened.

" Miss Vardon," he said gravely, " please listen to me ! I'm anxious to help you in every way within my power, but I must warn you that the clues you are following will lead you to a bitter disillusionment—and worse ! "

The girl laughed scornfully, her eyes flashing.

" If you think you can put me off in that way, you are mistaken ! " she flashed. " In future you can go your way and I'll go mine ! "

With a defiant toss of her auburn hair she swept away towards the house, holding tightly to her latest clue.

The young detective's face was rather pale as he stared after her. Not till she was out of sight did he examine the tab he had snatched from the inside of the hat.

The tab bore two inked initials :

" D. V."

The young detective drew in his breath sharply, his worst fears confirmed.

" Donald Vardon ! " he breathed huskily. " Julie's brother ! And all unknowingly she's trying to expose him as the thief ! "

CHAPTER II

JULIE GOES HER OWN WAY

NOEL's mind worked swiftly. He found himself confronted by one of the strangest problems he had ever been called on to solve.

Was Donald Vardon—supposed to be away in Scotland—actually the thief ? Noel doubted it.

But whether innocent or not, one thing was certain : Julie, headstrong and impulsive, was doing her level best to track down the person dearest to her in the world !

If he was to save Julie Vardon from bitter disappointment, he must act on his own.

And there was no time to lose !

Swiftly, with grim determination, Noel made his plans.

He could only ward off the danger by learning the whole truth : the truth behind these mysterious thefts—the trail of false clues !

Thoughtfully he returned to the house, to re-examine the clues from a completely new angle.

Supposing that they had been " planted " there—as he was inclined to suspect. Who could have laid the trail—and why ? How was Julie's brother mixed up in it ? Were Mr. and Mrs. Parsons ?

Noel's expression was even more thoughtful as he went up to his room to prepare for dinner.

During the meal he found himself cold-shouldered pointedly by Julie, who devoted herself almost entirely to gay exchange of conversation with her uncle's secretary.

Professor Tremayne himself appeared a trifle worried, and he questioned Noel anxiously as to the results of his investigations.

" I've learnt a great deal," announced Noel, encountering Julie's scornful glance. " I'm almost convinced that I'm on the right track."

Julie turned pointedly to Roland Baxter.

" You did promise to help me in my search, didn't you, Mr. Baxter ? " she asked.

" Rather ! " replied the secretary, with a good-humoured smile. " I'd be delighted ! "

The young detective smiled grimly as he reached for his coffee. It was obvious that Julie meant to go ahead with her quest, in defiance of his advice.

After dinner, Julie disappeared on some errand of her own ; Baxter and the professor had work to do. Noel was left to his own resources.

The young detective strolled into the grounds. He had a definite plan in mind—and there were certain points in the mystery that he was particularly anxious to clear up.

Could any intruder have contrived to get into the grounds unseen? Was the false trail of clues designed merely to divert suspicion from the real thief—or was there some more sinister purpose behind it?

An examination of the high walls suggested that only an athlete could contrive to scale them without the aid of a ladder. But Noel continued his search; and at length his patience was rewarded.

Obstinately Julie clung to the battered hat. "I've found this clue, and I'm going to keep it!" she told Noel Raymond. Plainly, she regarded the young detective as an unwanted rival!

On one part of the wall, farthest from the house—and hidden by dense shrubbery—he discovered unmistakable traces of some kind of ladder having been used—possibly a rope-ladder with hooks.

The creeper was torn, and the grass was trampled.

Noel whistled softly, his expression suddenly grave.

If an intruder had broken in, the fact seemed to smash his theory of an "inside" theft. Or—was this another clue that had been deliberately planted?

Noel was frankly worried. He suspected where Julie's trail would lead her—and he dreaded the result of her impulsive investigations.

Torch in hand he continued his search. Ahead of him, through the trees, he saw a tumbledown old lodge—obviously disused.

The windows were boarded, and weeds grew in tangled riot in what had once been the garden.

As Noel approached the desolate building he saw a dim light shining through a crevice in the boards!

A noiseless whistle escaped his lips, and his eyes glittered as he moved cautiously among the bushes till he drew level with one of the ground-floor windows.

He attempted to peer through a crevice in the boards—but could see nothing except a stump of candle burning fitfully on a rough deal table.

No sound came from within the house; the spluttering candle alone suggested the presence of an occupant.

Swiftly the young detective made up his mind. Taking a bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket, he inserted one in the door; there came the rusty click of

the falling latch—and Noel flung open the door, stepping into the room.

As he did so, the spluttering candle was extinguished. A shadowy figure sprang at him from the gloom, knocking the torch from his hand and sending him sprawling backwards.

Noel, not unprepared for an attack, grappled swiftly with his attacker.

The other man was obviously young and powerful, and more heavily built than Noel.

Not a word was spoken as they swayed in the darkness, each attempting to obtain the mastery.

It was rarely that the young detective had been matched against so powerful an opponent. Finally he resorted to a ju-jutsu trick to throw his assailant; the other staggered backwards, recovered miraculously, and leaped for the door, slamming it in Noel's face.

Swiftly Noel had it open, and, picking up his torch, he ran some distance without seeing his quarry, when suddenly he halted.

The gleam from his torch stabbed the darkness.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated softly.

For, standing there, flushed and triumphant, a magnifying glass in her hand, was Julie Vardon.

"Miss Vardon!" rapped Noel, staring at her.

The girl eyed him defiantly, holding something behind her back.

"You may be interested to know that I've found another clue," she said. "I'm convinced that the thief has been hiding in the old lodge—and that he'll come back again!"

"What makes you so certain?" asked Noel quietly.

"Because," said Julie with a triumphant smile, "he dropped this!" She held up an envelope. "There's some kind of message inside—in code. I'm going to ask Roland Baxter to help me decipher it—and I'm going to lay a trap for the thief!"

Noel's face paled.

"Look here, Miss Vardon," he said gravely, "can't we bury our differences and work together? If you carry out this plan of yours you may regret it to the end of your life!"

Julie looked rather startled by his tone; then she gave a quick laugh.

"You're just trying to scare me," she said. "It won't do, Mr. Raymond! You go your way and I'll go mine; and I'll prove that my way was best!"

Noel clenched his hands as he stared after her.

The headstrong girl was going the right way to wreck her own life—and her brother's.

And the young detective was powerless to dissuade her.

. . . . . .

"WELL, Mr. Baxter, have you solved the cryptogram?" asked Julie eagerly.

The secretary shook his head with a smile.

"Not yet; but I have hopes. Better leave it with me for the time being."

But Julie shook her head.

"I'm going to lay a trap," she whispered, "this evening! The cryptogram will be the bait and I want you to help me. But promise you won't breathe a word to that conceited detective."

Roland Baxter laughed.

"Aren't you being rather hard on Noel Raymond? He's got a big reputation, you know."

Julie tossed her attractive head.

"I don't care about his reputation; he's not nearly as clever as I thought he was—and—and he needs taking down a peg or two. I'm going to catch the thief without his help. Listen."

Swiftly she outlined her plan.

Half an hour later, Julie and the secretary, with Professor Tremayne and the village constable—who had been hastily summoned by telephone—made their way towards the old lodge.

They found the door standing open, the lock shattered. The place was deserted—though a burnt-out candle revealed that someone had been there recently.

The constable was posted in the garden. Roland Baxter and the professor stood just inside the room, behind the door

Julie herself stepped into a cupboard, half closing the door.

" Don't make a sound ! " she whispered. " The thief is bound to return for that envelope—and we'll catch him red-handed."

A quarter of an hour passed—half an hour ; Julie's nerves began to play uneasy tricks. The suspense was becoming almost unbearable.

On the table she had placed the fateful cryptogram, in full view of the door.

Suddenly there came a faint, stealthy footstep ; a muffled figure appeared in the doorway and took a hurried step towards the table, snatching up the cryptogram.

" Quick ! " cried Julie, starting from the cupboard, torch in hand.

The intruder spun round with a start, and at the same instant Baxter and the professor leaped at him, securing his arms.

Julie darted forward triumphantly and whipped off the scarf that concealed the other's face.

Then a startled, chagrined cry escaped her lips.

For, staring at her grimly, a dry smile on his lips—was Noel Raymond !

CHAPTER III

HER BROTHER'S SECRET

" You ! " gasped Julie.

" Mr. Raymond ! " exclaimed the professor angrily. " What does this mean ? "

Noel shrugged.

" Surely," he replied dryly, " that is for Miss Vardon to say."

Julie faced him, her eyes blazing.

" It's a trick ! " she gasped. " A hateful trick. He's deliberately trying to assist the thief to escape ! "

Noel bowed gravely.

" Miss Vardon is perfectly correct," he replied. " That is what I'm trying to do."

Noel's cool statement caused a sensation in the group.

" You admit that ? " demanded the professor incredulously. " You—a well-known detective—admit a plot to aid this scoundrel to escape ? "

The young detective shrugged as he calmly lit a cigarette. There was an almost humorous glint in his eyes as he encountered Julie's accusing stare.

" I do not admit that he is a scoundrel," he replied. " That is where Miss Vardon and I differ."

" Oh ! " gasped Julie, her hands clenched. " Don't listen to him, uncle. From the very first he's tried to spoil my investigation and to prevent me catching the thief."

The professor nodded sternly.

" Mr. Raymond," he said brusquely, " I should be obliged if you would leave my house without further delay."

Noel bowed coldly.

" I shall leave at once," he said. " As soon as I have had time to pack."

Turning, he strode back towards the house, without another glance at Julie.

Reaching his room, he locked the door and took from his pocket a crumpled slip of paper.

The fateful cryptogram !

Noel smiled grimly as he set to work to decipher it. By a piece of clever sleight-of-hand he had extracted it from the envelope on the table in the lodge and substituted in its place a sheet of blank paper !

He wondered what Julie would think when she found it.

But his expression became grave as he deciphered the code—the code that had baffled both Julie and the secretary.

" Great Scott ! " he ejaculated under his breath.

" To-night—at ten," he read. " Situation desperate. Will look out for the usual signal.—D. V."

" Donald Vardon ! " muttered Noel.

The cryptic message banished the last possible shred of doubt. Julie's brother was mixed up in this affair—and, unless a stop was put to the girl's headstrong actions, she might even be the cause of her brother's arrest !

Noel thought quickly.

To whom had the cryptic message been written ? One name flashed immediately into his mind. There was no time to lose if he was to confirm his suspicions.

Packing hastily, the young detective made a pretence of leaving the house.

But as he reached the gate he doubled on his tracks and approached the mansion cautiously from the rear.

There, concealed by the bushes, he lay in wait.

The time dragged past. By the illuminated dial of his watch Noel could see that it was close on ten o'clock.

Then abruptly he stiffened, every nerve alert.

From the direction of the house he saw a light flashing. Two long flashes and then a short one. The signal was repeated.

The young detective crept nearer. The light was flashing from a basement window.

Cautiously, keeping in the shadows, he approached the window—to see a white face pressed against the bars.

A flight of steps led down to the basement, and Noel descended them noiselessly, throwing open the door.

There came a frightened cry as the figure crouched by the window turned suddenly, torch in hand.

The housekeeper!

In a flash Noel caught the woman by the arm, twisting the torch neatly out of her grasp.

"What—what do you want?" she gasped.

"To whom are you signalling?" countered Noel sternly.

"That's my business," replied the woman in sullen, half-scared tones.

"You refuse to answer my question?"

The woman's lips tightened, and she made no reply.

The young detective shrugged.

"Very well. We'll try another way."

Still keeping a firm hold on her arm, he flashed the torch towards the window—two long flashes and a short one.

"Stop!" cried the woman, her face paling. "You don't know what you're doing."

"I'm willing to risk that," rejoined Noel grimly as he continued the signals.

In a few moments came a reply—a glimmer of light among the trees. The light was approaching the house.

With sudden desperation, the housekeeper twisted her arm from the young detective's hold and raced for the area door.

Noel bounded after her, but even as he reached the door a burly figure sprang from the shadows, and the young detective was sent sprawling backwards with a blow that might have felled an ox.

He heard the door slam and the key grate in the lock.

Dazed and shaken, he flung himself at the door, seeking to smash it open.

But the door was built to withstand burglars—and the window was heavily barred.

For an instant Noel caught a glimpse of an athletic figure climbing on to the railings outside, then the moon vanished behind a cloud.

His hands clenched, the young detective stared round him. His gaze rested on a massive iron bar leaning against the wall of the room. He snatched it up and attacked the door with all his strength.

Every moment was vital if he were to avert a tragedy.

. . . . .

THE clock in the old tower was chiming a quarter to eleven as Julie Vardon crept out of her bedroom and made her way cautiously towards her uncle's study.

She believed that the rest of the household had retired, but Julie had no intentions of going to bed just yet.

For the last hour she had been standing behind her bedroom door listening, her ears strained for the slightest sound.

And now she had heard it, that sound she had half-expected—the creaking of a loose board just inside the window of the study.

A mysterious intruder had entered the house.

Julie was convinced of it, and her pulses thrilled with excitement.

It was the crowning moment of her investigations, the proof of her ability as a girl sleuth.

In her hand—that trembled slightly, in spite of herself—Julie grasped a revolver. It was an old Service revolver that had belonged to her brother—and it was unloaded. Julie had never handled a weapon before, but the touch of it gave her confidence.

Her heart beating quickly, she approached the study door and listened. She could hear no sound, but she was certain that there was someone in the room.

Plucking up all her courage, she turned the handle softly and threw open the door.

Silhouetted against the dim light from the window was a tall figure.

" Put your hands up ! " exclaimed Julie breathlessly. " If you move I'll—I'll fire ! "

She saw the figure stiffen, turning sharply towards her.

" Don't be a fool ! " came the husky retort. " Put down that weapon ; it might go off ! "

Julie's lips tightened as she felt for the switch, but there came no answering gleam of light as she pulled it down. The mysterious intruder had taken the precaution of removing the bulb.

" Uncle ! " called Julie at the top of her voice. " Uncle —quickly ! The burglar ! "

Doors were thrown open ; her uncle appeared on the landing in his dressing-gown. Roland Baxter, the secretary, emerged fully dressed from the laboratory.

" Julie, what——" he exclaimed.

" The burglar ! " gasped Julie. " Oh, quickly ! He's in here ! "

The mysterious intruder made a dive for the window, but his foot caught in one of the rugs and he fell to the floor.

The secretary was the first to reach him, grabbing him by the shoulder. A brilliant beam from the professor's torch stabbed the darkness, revealing the man's face.

There came a broken, horrified cry from Julie.

" Don ! "

" Donald ! " exclaimed the astounded professor.

Donald Vardon rose to his feet, his good-looking face rather pale. Baxter kept a firm hold on his shoulder.

Julie was staring at her brother in anguished bewilderment.

Donald Vardon turned and smiled rather bitterly.

Julie gave a startled gasp as the attache-case burst open, and on to the floor rolled the stolen curios. It looked as if her brother would be arrested as a thief—and all because she had ignored Noel's warning !

" I'm sorry, Julie ! " he said. " I'd have liked to have spared you this, but you gave me no chance."

" What does this mean ? " demanded the professor huskily. " I demand an explanation, young man—at once ! "

A stubborn expression crossed Donald Vardon's face.

" I'm afraid, sir," he said, " that I am not in the position to explain just now. Because of an old difference of opinion, you have barred me free access to your

house, so I had to obtain entrance as best I could after dark."

"Donald!" gasped Julie, a little choke in her voice.

"Confounded cheek!" muttered Baxter. "What have you got in that case?"

He pointed to an attaché-case grasped in the other's hand.

"Mind your own business!" rejoined Donald curtly.

"It is my business!" declared Baxter, making a grab at the case.

There was a struggle. With a cry, Julie attempted to part them. In the tussle the attaché-case burst open—and on to the carpeted floor rolled the stolen curios!

"Look!" shouted the secretary.

Julie, her eyes wide with piteous dismay, stared at the incriminating evidence.

Too late she recalled Noel Raymond's warning; she realised now that the young detective had done his best to avert the very thing that her headstrong action had brought about.

The professor was staring at the contents of the case like a man in a dream. His face was dark with mingled anger and grief.

"So this is how you repay me for my generosity to you in the past, Donald——" he began huskily.

"I tell you I know nothing about those things, sir!" declared Julie's brother.

"I suppose they got into your case by accident?" Baxter sneered.

At that moment the door burst open to admit Noel Raymond, accompanied by a uniformed inspector.

The young detective was breathless and dishevelled, but there was a grim smile on his lips.

"Just a minute!" he said. "Sorry I couldn't get here before, but I was delayed by Donald's friends—the housekeeper and her husband."

"Who the deuce are you?" demanded Donald Vardon, staring.

"Noel Raymond—at your service," replied the young detective. "We've met before—in the lodge. You pitched into me without waiting for an explanation. If you'd waited I'd have warned you to be careful what you took out of Baxter's room."

The secretary started.

"Whatever are you talking about?" he demanded truculently.

"Young Vardon found that case in your room," announced Noel grimly. "You needn't deny it; your initials are on the case, though they've been partly obliterated." He picked up the case, pointing to some blurred markings on the leather. "Donald imagined that the case contained certain papers—papers dealing with the professor's secret experiments. Detailed lists ready to be dispatched to the foreign agents in whose interests you are working——"

"That's a lie!" shouted the secretary.

"On the contrary!" snapped Noel. "I've found the papers, together with a code message from yourself, concealed in the lining of your overcoat. You've packed your things, ready to leave the house to-night. Have a look at these, Vardon."

As he spoke he tossed a sealed envelope across to Donald.

The baffled secretary made a dive for the door, only to be caught by the inspector.

Donald Vardon ripped open the envelope, and his eyes glittered.

"Thanks!" he said. "Here's all the proof I want."

"Donald's in the Secret Service," explained Noel, smiling at the amazed Julie. "He tumbled to the fact that details of your uncle's experiments were leaking out, and he suspected that a spy was in the house. Owing to an old difference of opinion he was out of favour with the professor; so, aided by the Parsons, he contrived to keep watch on Baxter's movements without revealing his presence.

"Baxter got wind of this, and decided to set a trap to blacken Donald completely in his uncle's eyes. Hence the thefts—and the cunningly laid false trails."

"What a fool I've been!" Julie said. "I was so taken up with my own cleverness that I didn't dream——"

Noel smiled as he took her hand.

"Every detective makes a mistake at times," he said. "It's all part of the game."

THE END

Rivals for the Ice Gala Trophy

Tess Montrose and Mary MacTavish, the heroines of that popular serial " The Masked Skater," are featured in this enthralling School Story

By

GAIL WESTERN

CHAPTER I

THE MISSING COSTUMES

"THIS Aunt Sally shy will be the sensation of the Ice Gala! Mary, you deserve a medal. This idea was a real brain-wave."

Warm and snug in her green ski-ing suit, Tess Montrose smiled across at the Scots Fourth Form captain of Glen Castle School, while from the rest of the Fourth Formers there came an enthusiastic :

" Hear, hear ! "

Mary MacTavish, busy packing snowballs into a big wooden box, looked up with a cheery grin.

" It's na so bad, though I say it maself," she admitted. " I only hope it will bring in the cash on Saturday. We've simply got to beat yon crowd fra' Ben Garry College, ye ken."

" We'll do that an' all," said plump Beryl Trent.

" Rather," declared Tess. " Don't you worry, Mary. We'll raise the most money. you see if we don't."

Her confidence was echoed by the other girls, and proudly they surveyed the stall which had been erected on the edge of the frozen lake. This was to be their contribution to the Ice Gala that was being organised in aid of the Red Cross. All the schools in this part of Scotland were to take part, and there was great rivalry to win the cup which had been offered to the group that raised the most money.

The girls at the near-by Ben Garry College had decided to run a waxworks exhibition—a good idea, as Tess & Co.

had been the first to admit, but in their Aunt Sally shy they believed they had an even better scheme for raising funds.

The Aunt Sallies consisted of huge snowmen, and snowballs were to be used instead of the usual wooden balls. The glistening white figures had been dressed up in costumes hired from a theatrical agency in Kenbrae, and to win a prize competitors had to knock off one of the hats.

" They look simply grand—especially that one of the pirate in the far corner," chuckled Tess. " Come on, let's all have a shot. We'll be too busy on Saturday to join in the fun."

A rush was made for the box of snowballs, and laughingly the Fourth Formers let fly at the comically attired snowmen.

" How's that ? " cried Tess, as her snowball struck the top-hat of the " Glasgow business man " fairly and squarely in the centre, then she grimaced as the hat only wobbled and the snowball dropped to the ice in fragments. " Golly, you don't mean many people to win a prize," she laughed, looking across at Mary. " What have you stuck them on with—glue ? "

" Och, 'tis weak ye are," snorted the Scots girl. " Ye should take more porridge wi' your breakfast. Here, stand aside, and I'll show ye how to do it."

Helping herself to the hardest snowball she could find, Mary took up her stance before the long line of glistening figures. While Tess and the others watched laughingly, she took determined aim at the picture hat worn by a stately-looking " woman " dressed in a long crinoline.

" Ye canna' miss if ye throw straight," she declared.

Unfortunately, however, it was not easy to throw straight. The ice was slippery, and as Mary let fly she slithered—with the result that instead of hurtling for her objective, the snowball flew off at right-angles.

There came a burst of laughter from the watching Fourth Formers, quickly followed by a startled shout from Tess, as she saw two girls from Ben Garry College approaching.

" Hi, look out there ! " she called.

One of the girls quickly dodged as she saw the oncoming snowball, but the other stepped right in its path.

The missile caught her full in the chest. There was an angry gasp, then the sound of a thud, as the unfortunate girl lost her balance and hit the ice with a bump.

" Oh, golly, it's Cynthia Graham ! " gasped Tess, and, as she saw that the fallen girl was the leader of the Fourth Form at the near-by college, she rushed forward and helped her to her feet. " I say, I hope you're not hurt," she said. " We're awfully sorry, but it was an accident, you know."

To her relief Cynthia seemed ready to accept the apology, especially when Mary ran up and also expressed her regret. The other college girl—dark-haired and with an aggressive chin—gave a scornful laugh, however.

" Accident, indeed ! " she exclaimed. " You did it deliberately ! This is just another exhibition of your spite."

" What d'ye mean ? " cried Mary, quick to take offence.

The dark-haired girl—Jean Mortimor was her name—ignored the indignant Scots captain, and turned to her own chum.

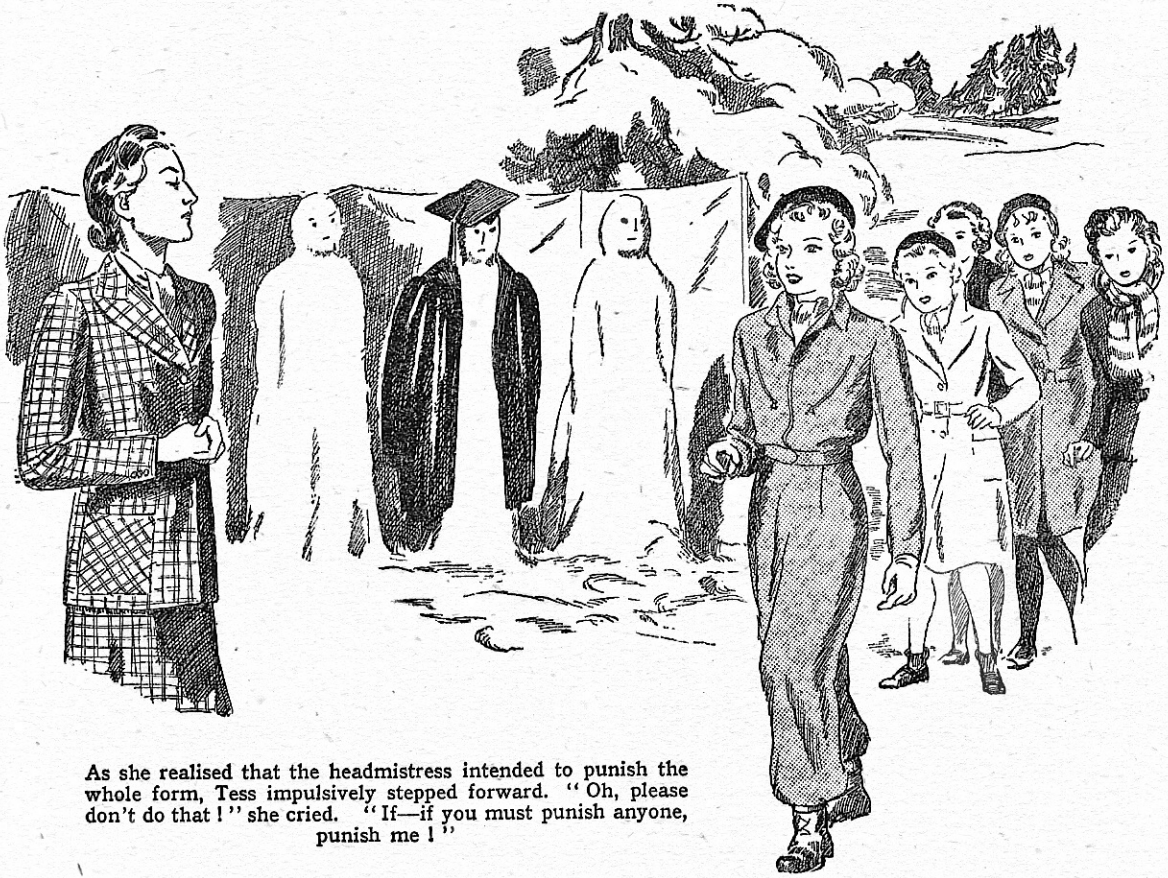
" Now perhaps you'll see that I'm right," she said. " This crowd's jealous. They know we'll win the competition on Saturday, and so they're out to cause trouble. That's why they took our costumes."

" Costumes ! " It was Tess who intervened, and she regarded the two college girls in bewilderment. " What on earth are you talking about ? " she demanded.

Jean Mortimor would have replied, but Cynthia, her pretty face pale and distressed, raised a restraining hand.

" Leave this to me, Jean," she said, and turned worried eyes on the wondering Tess & Co. " You know we keep the costumes for our waxworks in the boathouse over there," she said. " Well, when we went to arrange them just now we found them gone."

" Yes," broke in the dark-haired girl, " and the door had been burst open. Someone had deliberately broken in and taken them."



As she realised that the headmistress intended to punish the whole form, Tess impulsively stepped forward. "Oh, please don't do that!" she cried. "If—if you must punish anyone, punish me!"

Tess and the rest of the Glen Castle Fourth Formers exchanged horrified looks, but from Mary MacTavish there came an angry cry :

" Is it that ye accuse us o' takin' them ? " she cried. " If that isna' the limit ! How dare ye ! Let me tell ye that we havena' seen your costumes ! What's more, we're not even interested in your waxworks show. If ye think we're jealous——"

An excited shout from the girl at Cynthia Graham's side interrupted her, and Tess & Co. were startled to see Jean Mortimor suddenly plunge between the canvas screens that fenced in their Aunt Sally stall and make a dive at the nearest snowman. A moment later and Cynthia had joined her, and together they started tearing off the costumes with which the snow figures had been adorned. Most of the Glen Castle girls stared dazedly, but Tess and Mary rushed angrily forward.

" Och, but what's the big idea ? " demanded the Scots girl.

" You leave our costumes alone ! " ordered Tess.

" Your costumes ! " gasped Cynthia, and now her pretty face was as scornful as Jean Mortimor's. " These don't belong to you ! They're the ones which were stolen from our boathouse ! "

" Wh-aaa-t ? "

Tess & Co. cried out incredulously, while Mary, grabbing at the plaid shawl which the rival Form captain clutched, glowered fiercely.

" Ye must be crazy ! " she ejaculated. " We hired this stuff fra' Kenbrae, an' we only unpacked it oot o' the hamper this mornin'."

Her voice trailed away, as she turned over the shawl, eager to display the name of the theatrical agency embroidered on it, and her eyes nearly popped from her head

as she saw, instead of the name she had expected there, the crest of Ben Garry College. " Och, but what's it mean ? " she gulped.

Cynthia snatched the shawl back from her, while the dark-haired girl gave a mocking laugh.

" It's plain enough, I should think ! " she asserted. " But you're not going to hang on to our costumes—I'll see to that."

And she started to unclothe the remainder of the snowmen, so roughly that one of the figures toppled and fell, while the head of a second crashed in ruins.

Tess & Co., although bewildered by the amazing accusation which had been levelled against them, glared as they saw the snowmen, on which they had worked so hard, in danger of destruction, and angrily they rushed in defence of their property.

" Steady on there ! " cried Tess.

" You leave oor Aunt Sallies alone ! " ordered Mary. " I canna' explain how we came to have your costumes instead o' our own, but that doesna' gi' ye the right to smash up oor figures ! "

And grabbing Jean Mortimor around the waist, she pulled her forcibly back. Tess did the same to Cynthia, and the other Fourth Formers gathered around, all talking excitedly. The noise was at its height when a scandalised figure came striding along the path beside the frozen lake. It was Miss Sharpe, the headmistress of Ben Garry College, and as her shocked voice rang out the rival Fourth Formers ceased to struggle and fell back sheepishly. Sternly Miss Sharpe surveyed her own girls.

"What does this disgraceful scene mean?" she asked.

Cynthia explained, and as she learnt the story of the missing costumes their headmistress' features became sterner than ever. Incredulously she turned to the Glen Castle girls.

" Is this true ? " she demanded. " Do you admit that these costumes belong to my College ? "

" Aye, but we didna' take them," replied Mary.

" Of course we didn't," put in Tess warmly. " We're completely mystified as to how they came to be here. It must be some kind of a joke."

" Joke ? " Miss Sharpe sniffed scornfully. " I am afraid we have another word for it at the College. However, I will leave your own headmistress to comment upon your behaviour. Cynthia—Jean, collect your things and follow me, and in future I forbid you to have anything to do with these girls."

While Tess & Co., torn between humiliation, anger and bewilderment, stood helplessly by, their rivals gathered up the costumes and, accompanied by their Head, marched off. When they had gone the Glen Castle girls woefully regarded their battered snowmen.

" What are we going to do now ? " gulped plump Beryl Trent, almost in tears. " There'll be an awful row when Miss Sharpe makes her report. You know how anxious our Head is that we should be on good terms with the College."

Tess nodded grimly, then abruptly she turned.

" Don't let's worry about that yet, though," she said. " Let's try to solve the mystery of those costumes." She frowned across at Mary. " You are sure that the hamper that arrived yesterday was addressed to us ? " she asked

The Scots Form captain nodded.

" Aye—positive, and it was fra' yon hamper that I took the costumes this mornin'."

" Then someone must have changed them over during the night," declared Tess, " though it beats me who could have played such a mean trick. Why should anyone want to cause trouble between us and Cynthia & Co. ? "

Most of the Fourth Formers looked blank, but Mary, still furious at the unjust accusation which had been levelled against them, gave her curly locks a scornful shake.

" Jealous they say we are," she muttered. " If ye ask me, the boot's on the other foot. It's the Ben Garry girls who are frightened they'll lose on Saturday. That's why they've made such a song-and-dance aboot their costumes."

Tess gave a startled gasp.

" Mary ! " she exclaimed. " Surely you don't think it was all a put-up job ! You don't think that it was Cynthia & Co. who changed over the costumes, and then pretended to be angry in order to cause trouble ! Oh, that's impossible ! I'm not very keen on Jean Mortimor, but the rest of the College crowd are good sports. They'd never stoop to such trickery as that."

Mary gave her head an obstinate shake.

" That remains to be seen," she said, " but just let yon trickster wait. I'll bowl her oot somehow. Now let's see if we can find oor costumes. They must be aboot somewhere."

They started their search in the boat-house where the theatrical hamper had been stored, and there, hidden under one of the upturned school skiffs, they found the bundle of missing garments. Tess also found something else—a large, blue linen button.

" Hallo, where did this come from ? " she asked.

" Yon trickster must ha' dropped it," declared Mary. She took the button from Tess, then gave an angry cry. " Och, but this proves that I'm right ! " she exclaimed.

" How ? " asked Tess.

" Ye remember that when we visited the College tent the other day we found Cynthia & Co. fiddlin' around wi' their waxworks ? Well, they were all wearin' overalls, an' I'm pretty sure that this button's come off one o' them."

Tess looked startled, while from the other Fourth Formers came horrified gasps. It really did seem that their Form captain was right. Not only had they been accused unjustly, but it might well be that one of their accusers was the real cause of all the trouble.

" Anyway, we'll soon make sure," asserted Mary. " Come on, ma bonnie lassies. Let's gang along to the College and ha' things out."

She made to lead the way out, but Tess laid a restraining hand on her arm. She knew how impulsive her chum could be.

It was with a sigh of relief that she heard from the distance the clanging of a bell. It was a preliminary warning that soon morning lessons would begin at Glen Castle School. Angry though she was, even Mary could not ignore that summons, and reluctantly she led the way back to school. As they filed into the Assembly Hall for the usual daily announcements, Tess & Co. half expected Miss Bishop, their headmistress, to say something about the row down by the lake, but apparently Miss Sharpe had not yet kept her threat to complain, for nothing was said about it.

The moment morning lessons were over Mary again suggested visiting the rival school, but Tess, anxious not to rush things, managed to divert her attention by urging that they should spend the lunch-time in repairing the damage to their Aunt Sally stall. The rest of the Form backed her up, and happily they all went down to the lake, but when they got there they received a shock.

For one of the giant snowmen had undergone a startling transformation. Not only had its features been altered, but now a scholastic gown adorned it, while a mortar-board had been fixed at a rakish angle on its head.

" Golly, who can have done it ? " cried Tess, staring in astonishment. Then she gave another gasp as she saw the placard that hung around the snowman's neck. " Miss Nosey Sharpe," she read dazedly. " It's supposed to be the Head over at the College."

" And a jolly good likeness, too ! " chuckled Beryl Trent. " There's no mistaking that long nose of hers."

" Ha, ha, ha ! "

There came an involuntary roar of laughter from the Fourth Formers, but their mirth was cut abruptly short, for from the near-by path came an outraged voice raised in quivering indignation.

" Now, perhaps, you will realise that my complaint was justified, Miss Bishop ! " it cried. " Not content with helping themselves to our costumes, these impudent girls have dared to insult me personally ! "

Round whirled Tess & Co.—to find themselves confronted not only by Miss Sharpe, but also by their own headmistress.

CHAPTER II

MARY HAS HER SUSPICIONS

THERE was a look of horror on Miss Bishop's scholarly face as she surveyed the offending snowman.

"Really, girls, this is beyond a joke!" she exclaimed. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves to allow your jealousy to get the upper-hand like this!"

"Jealousy!" cried Mary indignantly. "Och, but it's not us who's jealous, Miss Bishop. It's those girls at the College. It's they who've caused all the bother!"

Desperately Tess gave her chum a nudge, for she realised that this stormy attack would do more harm than good. Already Miss Sharpe was bristling like a turkey.

"How—how dare you?" she spluttered, and whirled on her companion. "Miss Bishop, it is insufferable that my girls—the innocent victims of this unpleasantness—should be made the scapegoats. I insist that the real culprits are punished."

To Tess' dismay Miss Bishop gave a grim nod. Although as a rule she was easy-going, she had evidently made up her mind, and when the still-angry Mary tried to speak she held up a stern hand.

"Please be quiet, Mary!" she ordered. "Your protests only make your behaviour worse. I insist on knowing who was responsible for this." She waved to the comically attired snow figure, then frowned at the Fourth Formers. "Let the person responsible own up immediately."

No one moved, and so Miss Bishop compressed her lips.

"Very well," she said, "then there remains only one course for me to adopt. The whole Form must suffer. You must withdraw from the Ice Gala."

There came a horrified gasp from the crowd of girls, while Mary went deathly white. Tess' heart ached for her, for she knew how keen and proud her Scots chum had been of their entry. It would be a terrible blow if they were forced to abandon it now.

Impulsively, Tess took a step forward.

"Miss Bishop!" she gasped. "Oh, please don't do that! If—if you must punish anyone, punish me!"

The Head surveyed Tess sharply.

"Do you mean to imply that you are the culprit?" she asked in shocked surprise.

Tess nodded.

"Yes—I accept sole responsibility," she declared.

Her statement was so unexpected that it left the Fourth Formers speechless. Even Mary could only stand and stare incredulously. Fortunately, Miss Bishop did not realise what a sensation Tess' words had caused.

"Very well," she said curtly, "in that case the ban on the form is lifted. They can continue their efforts, but you, Tess Montrose, will take no further part in the Ice Gala. You will write me five hundred lines, and you will be gated on Saturday afternoon."

"But, Miss Bishop——"

At last recovering her voice, Mary began to protest hotly, but the headmistress was in no mood to listen.

"Silence!" she snapped. "I have given my decision, and remember, all of you, if your conduct between now and to-morrow gives me the slightest cause for complaint, then the whole form will suffer Tess' fate. That is all. Now hurry up and remove those garments and return to school immediately!"

And with a grim, warning nod around, she and Miss Sharpe walked away. When they had passed out of earshot, Mary and the others crowded around Tess.

"What made ye do it?" demanded the Scots girl. "It was grand o' ye, but it isna' fair. Why should ye accept the blame for something ye havena' done?"

Tess smiled a little wryly.

"It was the only way to save our entry for the Gala," she said. "After all the hard work we've put into our Aunt Sally shy I couldn't stand by and see nothing come of it. Now don't worry about me, Mary. As long as you win the prize to-morrow I shall be satisfied."

The Scots captain scowled fiercely.

"It isna' fair!" she insisted again. "It's those College girls themselves who've been responsible for all the trouble. What's more, I mean to prove it!"

And she fingered the blue linen button

which Tess had found. Tess regarded her anxiously.

"Don't do anything rash," she urged. "I know what a hot-head you can be. Just remember what the Head said. If there are any more quarrels you'll all be banned from the Gala."

Mary made no comment, but turned to collect the mortar-board and gown which adorned the snow model of Miss Sharpe; then a little dismally they all returned to school. The afternoon was spent at lessons, and when they came to an end Tess was detained for a few moments by the Form-mistress.

When she was free she hurried to her study to help Mary lay the tea, but to her surprise her chum was not there. She waited a minute or two, then, as there was still no sign of the Scots girl, she went along to the Common Room, and looked enquiringly around at the Fourth Formers gathered there.

"Anyone seen Mary?" she asked.

Beryl Trent looked up from the book she was reading.

"I think she's gone skating," she said.

"Skating!" Tess stared incredulously. "But surely she'd never go off on her own," she objected. "Besides, we'd arranged to spend the postal order I got this morning on a tea-party."

"Well, she had her hat and coat on," Beryl declared, "and she was carrying her skates."

Tess frowned, as she remembered how fiercely determined her chum had been to discover the identity of the unknown enemy who had tried to get them barred from the Ice Gala. Had the Scots girl gone to follow the clue of the linen button? The college boat-house was situated on the far side of the frozen lake, and the quickest way to get there would be to skate.

"Goodness, I hope she hasn't gone exploring in the shed where they keep the waxworks!" Tess murmured apprehensively. "If Cynthia or her chums should find her there there'd be more trouble."

Knowing how reckless and obstinate Mary could be, she feared the worst, and, darting back to her own study, she donned her hat and coat, grabbed up her skates, and dashed out of doors. She would know no peace until she had discovered exactly what her chum was up to.

Hurriedly strapping on her skates, she set off across the lake, skimming over the ice at tremendous speed. When she came in sight of the rival boat-house she was dismayed to see Cynthia Graham, Jean Mortimor and a whole crowd of other girls gathered around the entrance. They were all wearing overalls over their school uniforms and all of them were talking in angry tones.

The Scots girl's eyes flashed as she examined the button Tess had found. "This proves that I'm right!" she declared. "Yon trickster from the college must ha' dropped it!

With a foreboding of trouble in her heart, Tess skated nearer.

"Hello, what's all the excitement about?" she asked.

Hostile glares greeted her, and Cynthia's lips twisted scornfully.

"That precious Form captain of yours has been up to her tricks again," she asserted. "We caught her in here, and when she saw us she bunked. We ran after her, but she managed to get away. But this isn't the end of it, you can be sure."

Desperately, Tess faced the angry college girls, hoping that she might be able to appease them.

"Look here, Mary didn't mean to harm your waxworks," she said. "She's got it into her head that someone's trying to create mischief between the two schools, and she came here to follow up a clue."

"Oh yes?"

"Don't talk rot!"

There came cries of derision, while Jean Mortimor, her dark eyes glittering, gave an angry laugh.

"It's no good you trying to take us in, Tess Montrose," she snapped, "for we've got proof of what your precious Form captain's up to. She's determined at all costs to see that we don't win the prize to-morrow."

"That's not true!" Tess gasped.

"It is," insisted Cynthia. "When Mary MacTavish disappeared amongst the trees she dropped a note, and Jean picked it up. Jean,"—she turned to the dark-haired girl—"read it out, will you?"

Obediently, Jean fished in the pocket of her overall, and as she did so Tess gave a violent start, for suddenly she became aware of the fact that the dark-haired girl's overall was fastened with large blue linen buttons—and one of them was missing!"

"My golly!" Tess breathed to herself. "It looks as if Mary was right!"

Her heart began to pound, as the startling suspicion that had flashed across her brain took shape. The mystery enemy who had already caused so much trouble was the rival Form captain's chum! But what had been her object? Tess was given no time for speculation, for the dark-haired girl, having produced a crumpled scrap of paper from her pocket, had smoothed it open.

"Here it is," she announced, and commenced to read. "'As our other plans have been such a failure, there's only one thing for it. We must smash up our rivals' waxworks. That's the only way of preventing them from winning.'"

Tess listened in dazed horror—but only for a moment.

Then she took a determined step forward.

"Let me see that myself," she ordered. "It's a forgery. A treacherous trick. Mary isn't even interested in your waxworks."

She made a snatch at the letter, but Jean Mortimor promptly darted back out of reach.

"No," she snorted. "This evidence is going to your headmistress. Do you think I'm going to let you destroy it?"

"Not likely!" put in Cynthia. "You'd better push off now, Tess Montrose. We have had as much as we can stand of you and your school."

There came a chorus of agreement from the other girls, and Tess' cheeks burnt with humiliation and anger. It infuriated her to think that anyone could believe Glen Castle capable of such mean behaviour; and as she saw the mocking glint in Jean Mortimor's dark eyes, her suspicions grew to certainty. This girl was the real culprit. It had been she who had caused all the mischief. In all probability she had written that incriminating note herself.

Eyes flashing, Tess glared around.

"Let me see that note!" she cried again. "It's a forgery, I tell you. A trick to throw the blame on Mary."

She hurled herself at Jean Mortimor and tried forcibly to wrench the crumpled scrap of paper out of her grasp. But Jean clung on to it, and in a moment the rest of the college girls had rushed to her aid.

The noise was at its height when there came an unexpected interruption.

"What does this disgraceful scuffling

mean ? " demanded a scandalised voice, and there stood Miss Sharpe. Instantly the girls fell away from each other, and the headmistress' already stern face grew sterner than ever as she saw that Tess had been the centre of the mêlée. " Tess Montrose ! " she exclaimed in a voice like thunder. " So once again you are causing trouble. Return to your own school at once."

Flushed and dishevelled, Tess faced the irate mistress.

" But please let me explain——" she began.

Miss Sharpe, however, raised an impatient hand.

" Not a word. You can do all the explaining that is necessary to your own headmistress," she snapped. " Depart immediately."

Tess hesitated, then, realising the futility of remaining, obeyed, but she did not at once return to Glen Castle. Up and down the lake she skated, hoping to run across her missing chum, but she saw nothing of her. At last, thinking that Mary must by now be at the school waiting for her, she also headed in that direction.

When she crossed the drawbridge and passed through the arched entrance she saw the whole Form gathered in the snow-covered quadrangle, all talking together. At sight of her, however, they ceased their excited discussion and eyed her anxiously.

" Where's Mary ? " gasped Beryl.

" Yes—have you seen anything of her ? " demanded another girl.

Tess shook her head, but before she could say anything there came a horrified gasp from the Fourth Formers.

" Then it's true what they're saying ! " declared plump Beryl with a groan.

Tess stared in bewilderment.

" True ! What's true ? " she asked.

" That Mary's run away ! " was the sensational reply.

" R-run away ? " stammered Tess, hardly able to believe her own ears.

Beryl nodded.

" Yes,—there's been an awful row since tea. Miss Sharpe's rung up to say that Mary was caught red-handed in the college boat-house. The college girls declare that she came to smash up their waxworks, and they say they can prove it. Poor Miss Bishop's in a terrible way. She's already barred us from the Ice Gala to-morrow, but that's not all. The rumour's going around that Mary's too scared to face the music. They say she's run away ! "

CHAPTER III

TESS ACTS ON HER OWN

" WELL, of all the absurd stories ! " Tess said stoutly, surveying the Fourth Formers. "As if Mary would run away ! " she exclaimed. " She'll turn up any minute now—you see ! "

Plump Beryl Trent gave a woeful sigh.

" Well, I hope so—if only to put things right for us about the Gala," she muttered.

As they thought of the ban which the incensed Miss Bishop had put on their Ice Gala efforts, the Fourth Formers ceased to puzzle over their Form captain's absence, and even Tess looked glum and dismayed.

The news had come as a terrible shock to her, and her heart ached as she realised how bitter was her chums' disappointment. They had all worked so hard—had all been so keen to try to win the coveted trophy—and now, through no fault of their own, they had been forbidden to take part in the Ice Gala.

" It's a shame," Tess told herself, and, as she remembered her suspicions with regard to Jean Mortimor, her eyes flashed. If only she could prove them ! " But we will somehow," she murmured under her breath. " The Form's not going to suffer unfairly. As soon as Mary returns we'll have a talk and see what we can do."

She frowned as she again thought of her missing chum. Was the Scots girl still continuing with her investigations ? Was that the explanation of her absence ?

" It must be," Tess told herself, but actually she, like the rest of the Form, felt uneasy and puzzled. And that feeling deepened when the bell clanged out for Roll Call and still there was no sign of Mary.

The headmistress herself marked the register, and when she read out the Fourth Form captain's name and there was no

reply, she looked sharply around the assembled girls.

"Does anyone know where Mary MacTavish has gone?" she demanded.

There came no reply, so Miss Bishop compressed her lips, and without any further comment went on with the Roll Call. But it was obvious what she was thinking; obvious, too, what many of the girls were thinking.

Tess, as she overheard the excited whispers that ran around the Assembly Hall, bit her lip.

"They're beginning to believe that absurd rumour," she muttered. "They really think Mary's run away! But that's silly! I know that she's not guilty, and so——"

Breaking off, she thought hard and anxiously. What could have become of her missing chum? Was it possible that she had met with an accident? Suppose that in fleeing from the incensed college girls she had slipped and hurt herself! Before Tess rose a picture of the Scots girl lying out in the snow, seriously injured, helpless. For a moment she was tempted to blurt out her fears to the whole school, then she shook her head.

"No—I'll search around on my own," she told herself. "There's just a chance that Mary has found another clue, and if only I can get in touch with her I might be able to help her to bowl out our secret enemy."

Her mind made up, she waited impatiently for the rest of the register to be marked, then, as soon as they were dismissed, she hurried out of the Assembly Hall, and made a bee-line for her study.

Donning her hat and coat, she snatched up her skates, and, crossing to the window, opened it.

Clambering over the sill, she dropped down into the snow below. Darkness had already fallen, but soon the moon would be rising. Indeed, by the time she gained the lakeside its silvery radiance was already lighting up the snowy mountain slopes and turning the great sheet of ice into a dazzling mirror.

Strapping on her skates, Tess set out for the far side of the lake. Near the college boathouse was the wood into which she guessed Mary had fled when pursued. It was there that she headed, and as she gained the trees her eyes lit up with satisfaction, for there, plainly to be seen in the thick snow, was a multitude of footprints. Obviously the angrily chasing Cynthia & Co. had gone this way.

The trail led deep into the wood, then the medley of prints came to an abrupt end. Evidently the college girls, tired of the chase, had turned back. Anxiously Tess searched amongst the trees, and at last her patient efforts were rewarded. For here was another trail left by a solitary person—and that person a girl, judging from the size of the foot-marks.

"Goodie!" she exclaimed. "I'm hot on the scent—I know I am. It was Mary who left this trail!"

Eagerly she followed the solitary set of prints. They wound in and out of the trees, leading for the road which connected the near-by girls' college with the main road to Kenbrae.

Tess was about to emerge from the trees when she pulled up abruptly. Standing at the edge of the wood was a solitary figure—the figure of a weedy youth, whom Tess instantly recognised.

"Why, it's Ralph Brean!" she exclaimed. "But what's he doing here, I wonder?"

Ralph Brean was the nephew of a wealthy local land-owner, who had offered the silver trophy to the group that raised the most money at the Ice Gala. He had the reputation of being a ne'er-do-well and a spendthrift, and rumour said that his uncle had threatened to disown him. Tess & Co., therefore, had been surprised when they learnt that Ralph and some of his pals were to take an active part in the Gala.

As Tess stood there, wondering whether to make her presence known or not, the youth gave a sudden whistle. It was followed almost instantly by an answering whistle, and from the entrance of the near-by college a slender figure came running. Instantly Tess darted behind the nearest tree, for the newcomer was Jean Mortimor.

Eagerly Ralph Brean greeted the dark-haired girl.

"Well, did you get it?" he asked.

Jean Mortimor shook her head.

"No—Cynthia insisted on taking charge of the key when we locked up the boathouse. She says she's taking no risk of anyone breaking in again. But don't worry, Ralph, I'll get it out of her handbag as soon as she's asleep."

The weedy youth scowled.

"That means I'll have to hang about here for hours, I suppose," he muttered.

"Until about ten, I'm afraid," was the reply. "Sorry, but it can't be helped. We can't afford to take any risks, you know. Anyway, cheer up and think of their faces in the morning when they find their waxworks are smashed up."

There came a horrified gasp from the Fourth Formers. "Then it's true what they're saying!" exclaimed Beryl. "Mary's run away!"

They both laughed, and Tess, crouching behind the near-by tree, froze with horror, as she realised what was afoot. But why, now that Glen Castle had been barred from the Ice Gala, were Jean Mortimor and her rascally companion planning to wreck the college exhibition? She quickly learnt, for as she listened, the whole conspiracy was made clear.

Rumour had spoken the truth about Ralph Brean. His uncle had threatened to disown him unless he mended his ways. That was why it was so essential for him to do well at the Ice Gala, for if he won the trophy his uncle had promised not only to forgive him, but to renew the generous allowance he had formerly made him.

Tess' blood boiled as she realised the whole plot. Thanks to this rascally pair's scheming Glen Castle had already been barred, and now they were calmly planning to wreck the college waxworks—to ruin the hopes of the only remaining rival whom Ralph Brean feared!

"And the best of it is," he chuckled, "Mary MacTavish will get the blame! Thanks to that note you pretended to pick up, everyone will think she smashed the waxworks out of spite."

"But what about when you release her?" asked the dark-haired girl anxiously. "Suppose people believe her story?"

The youth gave another laugh.

"There's not a chance," he declared. "I'll keep her locked up in that old winter sports hut until Sunday night, then I'll let her free. By then everyone will be too furious to pay any attention to her—even if she has the pluck to return to school. Don't you worry, Jean. Everything's going to be okay, and I'll see you get your share. Soon as uncle's paid up I'll give you what I promised you."

"You'd better," the girl snapped.

" Well, I'll have to be getting back. It must be bed-time. I'll see you again at ten, and then—— "

But Tess heard no more. Her brain was whirling with all that she had already heard. So Mary was a prisoner! That was the reason for her continued absence! These treacherous conspirators had locked her up, and callously they intended to get her blamed for their wicked handiwork!

" But it shan't come off. It shan't! " Tess vowed to herself. " I'll expose them somehow! If only I can find Mary—— "

Breaking off, she tiptoed away through the wood, making for the snowy foot of the great mountain that guarded the lake. A thousand feet up was an old log cabin which was used by ski-ing parties in winter. Could that be the hut to which Ralph Brean had referred? Was it there that the missing Form captain was imprisoned?

Once out of sight, Tess broke into a run. There was not a minute to be lost if her chum was to be rescued and the conspirators outwitted. The path before her rose steeply, and here the snow lay in drifts. It took Tess nearly two hours to reach the hut, for at times she had to plough knee-deep through the snow; at others she found her way barred by fallen boulders and had to make dangerous detours. But at last the log cabin loomed before her.

" Mary! " she panted, pushing open the door and peering into the dark hut. Then her heart leapt, for from the far end came a tapping sound, as if someone were drubbing her heels on the floor.

Whipping out her pocket torch, she switched it on, and a startled cry escaped her lips as lying in the dust she saw a figure, bound and gagged.

" Mary! " she gasped. " Oh, the awful rotters! Fancy leaving you like this! "

Dropping to her knees, she tore off the ropes, and then, as the gag came off, the Scots girls gave a grateful gasp.

" Och, but that's better! Thank ye, ma bonnie, but how did ye ken I was here? "

It did not take Tess long to explain all that had happened, and her chum's eyes blazed as she learnt the full extent of Jean Mortimor's treachery.

" Ye say they're going to get busy at ten o'clock? " she gasped. " Then 'tis hurry we must." Jumping to her feet, she glanced at her wristwatch, only to give a dismayed exclamation. " Och, but it's a quarter to, the noo," she announced. " We'll never get down to the lake in time to stop them fra' smashin' up the waxworks."

" You won't," agreed Tess, " but I will."

The Scots girl stared.

" Why, what d'ye mean? " she asked.

Tess shone her light on the pair of old skis that lay propped against the wall.

" If I put those on I'll be able to ski down the mountain in less than ten minutes," she declared.

" But what about me? " Mary asked.

Tess chuckled, and, catching her chum by the arm, explained what she wanted her to do.

. . . .

" Hurry up, Ralph. This place gives me the shivers. The sooner we get the job over the better."

As she spoke, Jean Mortimor stared uneasily around the great barn-like building which had been converted into the college boathouse. Arranged on platforms around the walls were the waxworks, and other still figures gazed down from the ancient gallery which led to the upper rooms.

In the dim light of the lantern Ralph Brean carried, the wax figures looking uncannily lifelike, and the flickering shadows, the unnatural stillness and the festoons of cobwebs all contributed to the eerie atmosphere.

Jean Mortimor, never very courageous, felt even more nervous than usual, and it was agitatedly that she caught her companion by the arm.

" Do hurry," she urged. " Don't forget I'm out of bounds. There'd be a terrible row if I were discovered to be out of bed, and——"

She finished with a startled gasp, as from the darkness there came a queer squeaking sound.

" Wh-what's that? " she stuttered.

The weedy youth laughed.

" Only a mouse," he replied. " There's

nothing to be scared about. Now where shall we make a start?" sneeringly he surveyed the picturesquely attired waxworks, then with a grin strode across to where Queen Elizabeth stood. "You first," he chuckled, and with a thrust of his arm sent the wax figure toppling off its platform.

With a crash the model hit the floor, and smirkingly Ralph Brean marched up to the next figure. He was just about to send it also hurtling over when the girl at his side grabbed him with agitated fingers.

"Oh, listen!" she gasped. "That's not a mouse."

Scornfully the weedy youth turned, then he also gave a start, as from out of the darkness came an unmistakeable groan—a long drawn-out, hollow groan. To the nervous girl it seemed to come from the pallid lips of Queen Elizabeth, and with popping eyes she stared at that cold, still figure.

"It's—it's alive!" she breathed in horror.

"Don't talk such rot! It's only——"

Ralph Brean broke off, for again had come that ghostly groaning, and this time it seemed to emanate from somewhere in the gallery. Jean Mortimor almost leapt out of her skin. With terrified eyes she stared upwards. The figure of a white-robed abbess seemed to return her stare, and to her it appeared to move.

"This place is haunted!" she gasped. "There's something eerie about—— Oh, golly! Look! Look! The abbess—she's come to life!"

Transfixed, she stood there, and even the weedy rascal at her side felt the blood run from his face, for now there could be no mistake. Incredible though it seemed the white, spectral shape of the abbess had stepped down from its pedestal and was now gliding across the gallery. And suddenly one of its arms rose stiffly, pointing straight down at them.

"Beware!" came in hollow tones from its lips. "Destroy my companions at your peril!"

As far as the treacherous schoolgirl was concerned it was the last straw. She grabbed frantically at her companion's arms.

"Run for it—quick!" she gulped.

But Ralph Brean, having got over the first shock, only glared.

"It's a trick—someone dressed up!" he shouted. "Don't be such an idiot, Jean!"

And shaking off her quivering grasp he went plunging across the boathouse. Instantly the white-robed abbess turned and fled, and the youth gave a triumphant roar.

"There, what did I tell you!" he yelled. "Come on, catch her!"

Up the stairs he raced, and a little reluctantly the girl followed. Now there was no sign of the waxwork that had seemingly come to life, but Ralph Brean's eyes glittered as at the far end of the gallery he saw a wide-open door.

"She must be hiding in there!" he panted. "Come on!"

Through the doorway he plunged. After him rushed Jean Mortimor. And as they both vanished into the room beyond, a white, grinning figure emerged swiftly from behind the open door.

"Goodie! It worked!" she exclaimed, and, slamming shut the door, she shot home the massive iron bolt.

From the other side came furious shouts, as the conspirators realised how they had been tricked, and savage fists hammered on the bolted door.

"Let us out!" roared Ralph Brean. "Don't you dare——"

But a chuckle interrupted him.

"Not likely," said the phantom abbess.

From Jean Mortimor came a startled scream.

"It's—it's Tess Montrose!" she gasped.

"Exactly," laughed Tess. "I got here less than half a minute after you did, but you were too busy to notice me stealing upstairs—or change places with the real abbess."

There came more yells, and the door shook beneath the blows of the trapped pair, but Tess was not worrying. She knew there was little danger of them breaking it down, and any minute now Mary would return from her mission of rousing the girls at the near-by college. Thanks to her daring ski run down the

mountain side, and her ingenious idea of playing ghost, she had defeated the traitors.

Taking off her costume, Tess went downstairs. She glanced a little anxiously at her watch. It was nearly half-past ten. Mary was bound to be here soon.

Upstairs the furious shouts and banging of Ralph and Jean were still continuing, but Tess felt sure they would be safe for some time. Nevertheless, she was a little uneasy.

She remembered with horror for the first time that it had taken her nearly two hours to get up the mountain to Mary! Going down would be easier, but even so it would take a good while.

Suddenly Tess started; hardly breathing, she listened intently.

Strangely enough, the banging on the door had stopped, but now it was replaced by a queer scratching noise.

For a moment Tess waited tensely, then walked towards the bottom of the stairs. There was more scratching, a clink of metal and excited whispers.

In a flash Tess realised what was happening. They were forcing the lock. Oh, if only Mary would come! But she must stop them escaping somehow.

Frantically she rushed up the stairs, but even as she reached the top, the lock rattled, the door shook and burst open.

Jean and Ralph charged out, but before they could race across the landing towards the stairs, Tess heard the crunch of footsteps on the snow outside, then there were voices, girls' voices.

With a gasp of relief Tess realised the Ben Garry girls had arrived.

. . . . . .

WHEN a moment later a crowd of wondering college girls, headed by Cynthia Graham, arrived on the scene, Ralph Brean tried to brazen things out, but it was useless. He could give no adequate reason for his companion's presence here, and Jean Mortimor, her nerve broken, sobbingly confessed her guilt.

After that there came full explanations —and apologies. But Tess cut short the latter with a merry laugh.

"We don't bear any malice," she said. "All's well that ends well, so let's forget it—and may the best group win tomorrow."

"Och aye," agreed her grinning Scots chum, "and that means us, ye ken."

And Mary was right. The snowmen Aunt Sallies proved the big attraction and the Glen Castle exhibits easily raised the largest amount of money. When the results were announced Mary insisted that as Tess had been responsible for their victory, she should represent the Form at the presentation ceremony, so, blushing but happy, it was Tess who, amid cheers, ascended the platform and went to accept the coveted silver cup.

HER BANDIT FRIEND of MYSTERY

Pam Wendon laughed when Ramon Video, her handsome young Mexican friend, held up the stage coach and pretended to turn bandit. She thought it a good joke—but it was a joke that was to have startling consequences.

By ELISE PROBYN

CHAPTER I

ON THE WAY TO THE BALL

"PAM-EELA, tell me—how do I look? Ramon Video the Bandit comes back to life!"

Pamela Wendon turned from the mirror, then broke into a rippling little laugh. She was in the music-room of Senor Don Pedro's beautiful hacienda, at the foot of the San Vincente mountains, Mexico. Smiling at her in the doorway stood handsome, flashing-eyed young Ramon Video, steward of the stables.

"Ramon, you're faultless! You're—you're yourself again!" Pam said in ecstasy.

His dark curly head was crowned with a wide sombrero; he wore an open-necked check shirt, breeches and riding-cloak, a pistol at his belt. The garb of the mountain bandit! The garb he had worn on their first never-to-be-forgotten meeting!

And Pam's mind flashed back to the days before she was Don Pedro's secretary—before Ramon was steward of the stables.

Then he had been a hunted outlaw with a price on his head. Ramon Video, the Boy Bandit of the Mountains! Reckless, audacious, devil-may-care, he had laughed at law—snapping his fingers at the militia, revelling in the sport of the chase he led them. Every hand was against him. But he had saved Pam's life! She had been his "leetle Engleesh friend." His only friend!

"So this is me myself, Pam-eela?" he echoed her now, and heaved a humorous sigh. "Then to you I am still—a bandit?"

"You're still Ramon—and I like you best as you are now!" Pam said joyously. "You couldn't have chosen any costume for the dance that would have pleased me more, Ramon. But—you haven't told me if you like my costume?"

"Pam-eela always looks charming. To-night Pam-eela looks like the leetle English rose!" Ramon said with unaffected delight

" I thank you. I am so proud of my partnaire ! "

Pam laughed, but his compliment was gracious. He understood that she, too, had paid him a compliment. She knew it delighted him to see her wearing English dress, so to-night—as his partner for the fancy-dress ball—she was wearing a dainty and truly English ballet frock.

" Ah ! " Ramon's eyes suddenly twinkled. " I hear Marquita ! "

He stepped quickly behind a palm-tub, out of sight.

" Are you ready, Pam-eela ? " came a vivacious voice. " Ah, so sweet you look ! It ees Engleesh frock, yes ? Let me see ! "

Into the room ran Marquita, Don Pedro's daughter. She sparkled as usual with sunny excitement. She went into raptures over Pam's frock, quite unconscious of her own incontestable loveliness. Never had Pam met anyone so warmhearted, generous and completely unspoilt as Don Pedro's daughter.

" Marquee "—Pam drew her affectionately in front of the mirror—" you don't know how adorable you look ! "

" To-night I am Spanish gairl ! " explained Marquita. " You like my dress, Pam-eela ? That is good ? "

She lifted the mantilla and took a quick peep at herself in the mirror, then her sparkling dark eyes darted about the room.

" Where is Ramon ? He must not be late. I thought I heard him——" Her voice bubbled away into laughter.

Ramon stepped solemnly out from behind the palm-tub. The garb he wore made Marquita shake with mischievous glee.

" Oh, Ramon, you are rascal ! You have the audacity to dress up again like the bandit you used to be ! You will shock everybody at the dance. But you are a gay rascal, and I am glad you do it ! "

" You hear that, Pam-eela ? " chuckled Ramon. " Senorita has no more conscience than we have ! "

" And none of us must waste any more time ! " laughed Pam. " Are we all ready ? We've got a long drive up the mountains to the Hotel Rotunda. The coach ought to be here any minute ! "

" But you will excuse me, please," Ramon said softly. " I shall not be accompanying you in the coach, senoritas ! "

Pam and Marquita looked at him in amazement.

" Not coming in the coach ? But, Ramon——"

" I have a leetle surprise for you," he said with a mysterious smile. " I will join you, senoritas, at the Rotunda ! "

His twinkling eyes told them nothing and intrigued them more. They clamoured breathlessly :

" Ramon, what is the surprise ? What is it ? What——"

But Ramon had gone. He slipped out through the door leaving their curiosity unsatisfied. They heard his soft, provoking laugh. Then he vanished into the courtyard, and they heard the clop-clop of his horse galloping away over the cobbles.

Pam and Marquita looked at each other in mystified excitement.

" Pam-eela, what is Ramon's surprise ? "

" Honestly, Marquee, I'm just as much in the dark as you are ! "

" But he is your partnaire——"

" And he's left me dying with curiosity until I meet him at the ball ! " laughed Pam.

Then in the distance came the slower cloppity-clop of a four-in-hand. Pam and Marquita ran to get their cloaks. They were waiting at the gates as the big four-horse coach drove up to the hacienda.

It was a gay turn-out—loaded already with girls in fancy dress all bound for the ball. Marquita knew most of them. She introduced them to Pam as they clambered inside.

" Harlequin and Pierrette—they are the Valda sisters, Doree and Grenda. The rest, I think, are all their friends ! " And Marquita named them one by one, till she came to a handsome dark girl, dressed as a Dresden shepherdess, who was evidently alone. " Ah, the shepherdess, Pam-eela, I do not know ! " finished up Marquita, with a friendly and inquiring smile at the girl.

" Paula Mario is my name ! " the dark girl said shortly.

Her manner was not as becoming as her

costume, thought Pam. Having stated her name, Paula Mario took no more notice of Marquita or anyone else. All the lively chatter of the others left her remarkably cold and aloof for a Dresden shepherdess.

The coach bowled on through the moonlight, and presently it left the highway, and began the steep ascent of the mountain pass.

Pam's mind drifted away from the fun going on around her. She gazed through the window, stirred by a thousand memories, living again the glamorous adventures she had known in this wild world of the mountains. As the path became steeper, the way more rugged, her abstraction was noticed by Marquita—and understood.

" You think of the wild days, Pam-eela, when Ramon was hiding in these mountains—a bandit ? "

" And the wild nights, Marquee, when I stole up here in secret to meet him ! "

" You alone trusted that terrible bandit, my Engleesh Pam-eela ! "

" But you, Marquee, had a warm corner in your heart for him ! "

" For both of you ! " merrily confessed Marquita. " Never did I wish Ramon to be caught. Pairhaps I wish, sometimes, that we could have those thrilling times all over again, Pam-eela ! "

" With Ramon a bold bad bandit once more ? "

" Ramon will always be bold, but he was never bad ! " Marquita said cheerfully.

Paula Mario, seated opposite them in the coach, evidently caught the gist of this talk. She threw them a cold look. Then she turned to the girl at her side, and Pam heard her say distinctly :

" It's nice to know we can drive through these mountains, now, without being set upon by a dreadful bandit ! "

The words weren't out of her mouth when Pam heard the sharp clop-clop of a galloping horse. A shout from the coachdriver. A shriek of the wheels as they skidded to a halt. Then a boyish voice rang out—gay, but commanding :

" Hold your horses, driver ! Don't move—on your life ! "

Pam gazed spellbound. She saw a boy horseman blocking their path, a wide-brimmed sombrero pushed back on his curly head, a pistol in his hand levelled straight at the gasping coachdriver.

It was Ramon !

" Pardon my intrusion, senoritas ! " he said, doffing his hat courteously to the girls. " I merely want to relieve you of a few trifling valuables ! Please descend."

And leaning from his saddle he threw open the door of the coach.

Pam and Marquita were speechless. You could have heard a pin drop in the coach. Then a little cry of horror burst from Paula Mario, as they all alighted.

" It's a hold-up ! It's the notorious Ramon Video ! He's turned bandit again —he's going to rob us ! "

Ramon swept his eyes upon Paula and accorded her an exquisite bow.

" Senorita has saved me the trouble of introducing myself. If she will kindly open her handbag "—he smiled at the company—" if you will all kindly open your handbags, I shall not detain you long ! "

Pam met his rollicking eyes and suddenly she was shaking with inward laughter. She saw that even Ramon could hardly keep his face straight. He was playing an impudent prank. The scene of his old bandit days, the costume he had put on for the ball, had offered an opportunity too good to resist. This was his surprise !

The Valda sisters and their friends were already fumbling with their handbags. They were too excited to be scared. They thought they were figuring in the drama of their lives. Held up at pistol point by a real live bandit ! Pam could imagine them talking about it for weeks afterwards.

" Don't give him anything ! " Paula Mario was storming. " Where's your spirit, where's your courage ? "

But Doree and Grenda Valda were holding their handbags out to Ramon almost eagerly, their excited eyes gazing up into his face. And Ramon was helping himself to all sorts of trifling odds and ends—nothing of any value—then bowing

solemnly, and dropping them into his sombrero.

" He won't get anything from me, the thief ! " Paula insisted furiously.

But Ramon went methodically from one girl to another, plundering each of their handbags with faultless courtesy. He took a cardcase and a manicure set from Pam, who pretended to tremble.

She nudged Marquita. And Marquita played up to the joke superbly.

" Wicked bandit, you will fineesh on the gallows ! " she told Ramon, as he purloined an empty purse from her bag.

Last of all he turned to Paula.

" Senorita, if I may please trouble you—— "

" Keep away from me ! You'll get nothing ! " Paula said in a passion. " You're a coward as well as a thief. If my boy friends were with me you wouldn't dare—oh ! "

Deftly as a conjuror, Ramon had already extracted a few articles from her bag. A bangle, a gold pencil, a flashy pair of earrings—they glistened for a second in his hand, then he dropped them into the sombrero.

" Give those to me ! They're mine ! Give them to me back ! " Paula cried, her face distorted with temper.

" On one condition I will, later," confided Ramon softly. " That you permit me the honour of a dance to-night, senorita ! "

He turned on his horse and was gone, the echo of his laugh leaving Paula gaping stupidly.

" Wh-what did he mean ? " she stammered.

Pam's mirth exploded, Marquita rocked with laughter. The dazed looks of the others—above all Paula's indignant glare—made their agony worse.

" What are you laughing like that for ? " demanded Paula. " If you think it's funny to be robbed—— "

" You haven't been robbed ! " Pam said getting her breath back. " It was all a lark. Ramon's coming to the ball-to-night—he's my partner, and he's wearing those togs as fancy dress ! "

" O-oh ! "

The effect was excruciating. Most of the girls looked positively disappointed, as if they felt themselves cheated of a first-class thrill. It set Pam and Marquita off into another fit of laughter. Paula was the only one who didn't join in.

" But he's a thief—he's stolen our things ! " she argued hotly.

" He'll give them all back to us at the ball ! " Pam told her.

" He'll find himself in serious trouble if he doesn't ! " fumed Paula. " Everyone knows Ramon's past. He didn't play at hold-ups when the militia were after him. He robbed and plundered right and left. He was a notorious bandit. It's in his blood. Looks to me as if he's gone back to his old ways again—— "

" That's enough, Paula. If you can't take a joke, dry up ! " Pam begged her.

But Paula stuck to her opinion, and it all helped to keep the excitement lively as the coach rattled up the mountain pass.

" Anyhow, it was a marvellous thrill ! " everyone was saying.

" I wouldn't have missed it for anything ! "

" And it's not as if Ramon was an amateur bandit, because he's not. We all know what he used to be ! "

" Once a thief, always a thief ! " declared Paula.

Marquita turned a withering look upon her.

" You are fond of that word thief, Paula. Ramon was never one. He is now employed as my father's steward. And," Marquita added devastatingly, " my father does not employ thieves ! "

That shut Paula up. Pam looked out of the window to spare her feelings, and saw the white dome of the Hotel Rotunda towering up under the stars, lit by brilliant floodlights.

Its gay glamour was enchanting. The gardens were thronged with revellers in every costume and every colour of the rainbow. Pam's heart danced. She gazed radiantly in search of Ramon. A dozen boys came gathering round to meet their partners in the coach. But Ramon was not among them.

" Pam-eela, you must please meet Pietro,

"Look! The window's open!" cried Paula. "He's jumped through the window!" Pam stared in bewilderment. What was the reason for Ramon's hurried flight?

and Juan, and Tondro, and Gustaf, and—— "

Marquita's introductions were breathless, never-ending. But where was Ramon? Pam escaped at last through the ceaseless bustle and ran into the hotel vestibule. Laughingly she warded off a score of would-be partners seeking to waylay her. She took a peep into the ballroom. The Master of Ceremonies, magnificently turbanned and jewelled as a Turkish Sultan, came sweeping down upon her.

" Mees Pamela, you are entered for the Tango Competition with Ramon Video at ten-thirty, ees that so? "

" That's right, senor! "

But where was Ramon, why wasn't he here to meet her? That was what mystified Pam. He had made her promise him the first dance, and now here was the band tuning up. Here was the ballroom filling, and the M.C. calling to everyone to take their partners. But still no Ramon.

Pam couldn't save him the dance. In a trice Marquita's army of boys were round her. Before she had time to refuse Juan and Tondro, Pietro seized her and whirled her away into the waltz. It was double the pace of an English waltz. The gipsy band quickened the time till Pam's senses were dizzy. It was glorious, crazy fun.

Juan seized her for the next dance. Then Tondro. Where was Ramon? Pam tried to ask herself. But the minutes whirled by and the third dance was over when she was brought down from the clouds with an unpleasant start.

Someone else had noticed Ramon's absence! Paula Mario rushed to her side.

" So your friend Ramon was only playing a little joke when he robbed us? " Paula asked with deadly quiet.

" Of course! " Pam looked at her sharply. " What do you mean? "

" Then where is he? " flashed Paula. " Why is he not at the ball? Why is he not here to return the things he stole? "

The suddenness of the implication made Pam's colour flare crimson

" I'm waiting for Ramon now; he'll he here any minute—— " she began.

But Paula gave a bitter laugh.

" Of course he won't! You'll never see Ramon again! He's gone back to his old thieving ways and every girl who was in that coach realises it now to her cost! He's got his booty, and he's cleared off! "

Pam turned on her heel and walked away, not trusting herself to answer. But now she was mystified and worried too. If that was what Paula was saying, so would all the girls be saying the same! Every moment that Ramon was missing would deepen their suspicion.

In no mood to dance Pam slipped out of the ballroom and upstairs to the spectators' gallery, deserted now. Where was Ramon? What could have happened to him?

CHAPTER II

RAMON REFUSES TO EXPLAIN

PERPLEXED and uneasy, Pam sat on the arm of a loge and gazed down at the bright scene below.

From her perch here in the gallery she would see Ramon the instant he entered the ballroom. Never would he be more welcome. His bold, jaunty figure alone would give the lie to Paula's words.

The spotlight was playing now upon Paula and her partner. A picturesque couple they made, Pam owned to herself frankly. Paula's dark beauty gave her striking charm in the costume of a Dresden shepherdess. Who was to know what her poisonous tongue was saying except the boy who held her in his arms? He had been introduced as Manuel Santez, son of the Count Santez. He was sleek and immaculate in the garb of a Spanish toreador. Not in the least like Ramon's virile type. Not in the least likely to appreciate Ramon's little joke, or defend him against Paula's accusations.

There was something cool and arrogant about them both, thought Pam. She had the feeling they were talking about Ramon now. Their eyes kept wandering to the door as they danced together. If only he would come——

A curtain rustled behind Pam.

She swung round involuntarily. She saw only the drapings of a door in the gallery. Then the curtained drapings

rustled again. They parted—very softly, furtively. A boy's figure appeared there.

"Ramon!"

Pam sprang up from her perch.

With a smile and a sweep of his sombrero Ramon stepped out through the curtains.

"Pam-eela, I ask a thousand pardons for neglecting you so ungallantly."

"But, Ramon, where have you been?" Pam said, relieved but dazed.

"It is my sorrow, even more than yours, for I have missed the first waltz with you. But come, Pam-eela" — his eyes sparkled as the band struck up; he seemed not to have noticed her question—"here is the fox-trot. This is ours. We dance now, yes?"

He swung her into his arms, he was whirling her up and down the polished floor of the gallery. Far below the band played and the swaying throngs filled the ballroom. Here they danced in a world of their own. So much more exciting and intimate. Yet even more bewildering to Pam.

"Ramon," she smiled up at him breathlessly, "why not join the others?"

"They are happy. We are happy."

"But Marquita will be wondering——" She broke off in the middle of the sentence. It struck her crazily that no one yet had seen Ramon, and he was behaving as though he were deliberately eluding them. "Ramon, why did you creep through those curtains so—so furtively?"

"Here they are——" began Pam, then stopped, for the saddle-bag was empty. Had Ramon deceived her, or had someone else stolen the jewellery?

"Pam-eela!" His teasing eyes looked shocked. "Did you say furtively?"

"Well—mysteriously! And you haven't told me where you've been yet, and what you've been doing all this time," she hurried on with what little breath she could spare as they danced. "Remember, I haven't seen you since that marvellous hoax you played on the road."

"You enjoyed the little joke?"

"Grand! But it was colossal cheek. You forget that your fame isn't forgotten yet. That girl Paula——"

"Fame is fickle—it ees the good old wild days I do not forget!" sighed Ramon. "A horse—a pistol—a cave in the mountains. The whole world against me. But always me winning—me!

Because I had my little Engleesh comrade to help me."

"And because she was as mad as you were, Ramon!" laughed Pam.

"Mad? Then it was lovely to be mad! It was thrilling, wonderful, dangerous. It was life. To-night, Pam-eela, I longed for that life again!"

Pam started. She saw the old devil-may-care light in his eyes as he gazed down at her, laughing into her face.

"You, too, Pam-eela—you have longed for those wild, dangerous days again. You are like me. It ees in your veins. We are not like these other people—these dancing dummies. I am a bandit. You are the bandit's brave little comrade. We are outlaws. Born outlaws. We shall never change!"

"Ramon!" Pam's head whirled. "What have you been up to?"

"I?"

"Look here, no more mysteries! We're in it together, whatever it is, but what is it?" Pam demanded warmly. "What have you been doing to-night?"

"At the present moment," said Ramon, "I am dancing with the most charmeeng Engleesh——"

"Before you came here? That's what I want to know!"

"But you do know!" he parried. "You saw me, Pam-eela, commit a brazen robbery on the highway!"

"That was hours ago. I want to know what you were doing since—before you stole mysteriously, no, furtively, through those curtains. Now, no evasions"—Pam hurried on; she knew that look on his face—"I know jolly well you're hiding something from me, Ramon——"

"It ees my furtive nature!" he sighed.

"And I'm not asking out of curiosity," pressed Pam, playing her trump card. "It's because of what people are saying! When you disappeared and didn't turn up here, it made it look as if the coach hold-up wasn't a joke after all. One of the girls is furious. She's told all the others that you've robbed them, cleared off, and they'll never see you again!"

"Which girl was that?" asked Ramon, looking interested.

They broke off dancing, and Pam led him to the rail of the gallery. She pointed out Paula Mario fox-trotting in the centre of the floor.

"There she is—Paula Mario. The Dresden shepherdess."

"The girl with the cross temper?" smiled Ramon, then paused. "Who is that she is dancing with?"

"Count Santez's son!"

"Who?"

"Manuel Santez—I'd never heard of him till she met him here to-night—but that girl Paula hasn't taken your joke at all well, Ramon!" Pam said earnestly. "She's dinned it into everybody's ears that you used to be a bandit and that you've turned bandit again. They'll believe it if you don't hurry up and give them their things back."

He laughed lightly.

"Well, if that is all that worries Paula, it shall quickly be remedied!"

"She's looking up here now," observed Pam, drawing him back from the rail. "Where is the stuff, Ramon?"

"In my saddlebag."

"Then let's come down to the stables and get it now!"

"Such haste?" He looked at her teasingly, then his glance went quickly to the ballroom floor as the dance ended. "The band has stopped. I think, Pam-eela, we ought to visit the buffet before it ees crowded!"

"But what matters if it is crowded——" Pam began, tantalised.

But his only answer was to take her jauntily by the arm, and escort her down the stairs of the gallery to the buffet.

It was deserted when they first went in. Ramon ordered ices for them both. Then Marquita and her boys trooped in.

"Ah, here is Ramon! Where you hide yourself so long, wickeed bandit?"

Marquita swept down upon him with a thousand laughing questions about the "hold-up," and his elusive behaviour since. Pam joined in with every wile and guile she knew. But he evaded them both as mysteriously as ever. Why? She was baffled and enormously intrigued. Ramon was her partner; he would not have missed

the first dance with her except under stress. What had kept him? What had he to conceal?"

Another party sailed into the buffet. Leading them was Paula Mario.

"Pardon, Pam-eela!" said Ramon's voice in her ear.

Pam turned. She blinked. A door opened and closed behind Ramon. He had vanished!

In the same instant she heard Paula calling to the others and pressing her way through the throng.

"There he is! There's the thief! He—oh! He's gone!"

Paula pulled up in front of Pam, her face vindictive with excitement.

"He's dodged us! He dashed through that door! Quick—after him, girls!"

She nearly upset Pam's table in her haste.

She flew to the door. Flung it open. Then tottered back dizzily, treading on the other girls' toes.

"He—he's not here!"

Pam was staring blankly into an empty room. Here was the door through which Ramon had disappeared—here was the room it led to. But it was deserted. He had vanished into thin air!

Then a cry came from Paula——

"Look! The window's open! He's jumped out through the window!"

Pam's head reeled. The open window told its own tale. It clearly explained Ramon's escape. But why——

"Doesn't that prove it, girls? Didn't I tell you?" Paula burst out. "That hold-up was no joke! Ramon's turned thief again! He scooted as soon as he saw us! He's robbed us of our jewellery, he daren't face us, and——"

"Rubbish!" Pam butted in breathlessly. "Your things are all right. I know where they are!"

She was astounded at Ramon's unaccountable flight. But at least she could silence Paula before her accusation provoked any further sensation.

"Oh?" Paula swung round on her. "Well, since you know so much about the thief, Pam Wendon, where are they—where are our things?"

"In Ramon's saddlebag. I'll get them for you!" Pam said hurriedly.

She darted out through the buffet. But, quick as she was, Paula followed on her heels, bringing the whole coachload of girls with her. Perhaps it was as well, thought Pam. She didn't want them all chattering in the hotel. She was puzzled enough about Ramon's behaviour, without having him made the talk of the place.

"It was deliberate robbery!" Paula was saying. "My things are valuable, and if I don't get them back——"

Pam threw open the stable-door and switched on the light. Ramon's white horse, Reno, stood contentedly munching forage. He still wore his girthbelt and saddlebag.

With a sigh of relief Pam unstrapped the flap of the saddlebag and opened it.

"Here you are——" she began lightly, then stopped, dumbfounded.

The saddlebag was empty! Empty save for a few odds and ends belonging to Ramon!

"Our things aren't there!" came a gasp from the girls.

"There's nothing of mine here!" Paula said, shrill with anger, yet triumph too. "You knew it all the time, Pam Wendon! Ramon's a thief, and you are in league with him! You're as bad as he is! You only lured us here to give him time to get away!"

Pam was too flabbergasted to find her voice. She looked at Marquita in dumb despair.

"What are we going to do?" the girls were clamouring.

"I know what I'm going to do!" Paula said ruthlessly. "I'm going straight back into the hotel to telephone the militia!"

She marched back across the gardens leading the whole crowd with her. Pam and Marquita trailed behind them, both speechless. The only thought now in Pam's mind was to find Ramon, make him explain himself, and clear up the mystery before the consequences became serious.

She quickened her pace. She was abreast of Paula as they hurried into the vestibule. If only she could prevent her telephoning—find Ramon first——

" Ladies—ladies and gentlemen ! "

An agonised voice suddenly held Pam and everybody rigid.

The hotel manager came running down the stairs, his arms waving in wild gesticulations.

" Ladies and gentlemen, there's a thief on the premises ! " he cried. " Someone has broken into my office ! The safe has been rifled, and everything stolen ! We have a thief among us ! "

CHAPTER III

PAM'S STARTLING DISCOVERY

PAM tottered faintly. A wild hubbub was going on around her. She knew what everyone was saying, though their voices sounded a thousand miles away.

" Ramon Video ! "

" It's Ramon Video's work ! "

" He's rifled the safe ! "

" That's why he came here after he'd robbed us ! "

Pam's thinking senses had deserted her. She was in a kind of stupor. Her mind could only din back over the events of the evening. Ramon's mysterious behaviour. His evasive answers. His admission that he longed for the old bandit life again. His sudden flight when Paula and the other girls appeared. And now—now, while he had been missing from everyone's sight—the safe robbery ! What could it mean ? Was it—was it Ramon's work, was he guilty ?

The thought seemed to bring Pam back to her senses. She found herself in the ballroom again, swept in unconsciously with the rest of the excited guests. All were accusing the absent Ramon, denouncing him, demanding his capture. Paula, loudest of any. Pam just couldn't, wouldn't believe it of him. Her faith in him was the one solid thread in all this tangled skein of mystery. Nothing in the wide world would make her believe Ramon guilty.

" You helped him get away with it, Pam Wendon—you're as thick as thieves with him ! " Paula accused her. But Pam didn't speak.

Paula's boy friend, Manuel Santez, was busy taking notes. He had a pencil and notebook in his hand. He was questioning each of the girls who had been in the coach, and writing down every damaging statement that might serve to prove Ramon's guilt.

Pam was averting her eyes from him—but then something made her look again, made her fix her attention on the pencil he was holding. It was a gold propelling pencil. It was somehow familiar. And suddenly she gave a start.

Where had she seen that pencil before ? In the coach, surely ? Ramon had taken it from one of the girl's handbags ! He had taken it from——

" Paula ! " Pam jerked out. " Isn't that your pencil ? The pencil Ramon took from you ? How did—how did Manuel get it back ? "

Paula looked at her sharply, her lip slowly curling.

" Of course it isn't my pencil ! How could it be, when you know Ramon stole mine ? "

" But—but—— " Pam was lost for words. She was gazing closely at the pencil, recalling something else to her memory in a confused sort of way.

" Manuel's pencil is similar to mine," Paula said haughtily. " His father—Count Santez—gave us each one. That's why ! "

It was a complete answer. Manuel went on writing his notes. Pam's puzzled look was not even noticed by anyone. The band struck up again. The manager was agitating for the dance to go on, and assuring everyone that no thief had ever before entered his august premises.

" Please, please take your partners ! " he beseeched them.

" This leaves me without a partner ! " sighed Pam, and added in an artless tone : " I shall have to alter my programme. D'you mind lending me your pencil, Manuel ? "

He handed Pam the gold pencil, slipped his notebook into his pocket, and then whirled Paula away into the dance.

Pam waited till they were safely swallowed up in the throng. Then she edged out through the door, still clutching the pencil, and sped across the gardens to the stables.

Excitedly Pam watched the girl in the room open the box. Inside were banknotes and jewellery. The loot from the hotel robbery! Then abruptly Pam heard footsteps beside her. "So you spy!" exclaimed an unpleasant voice.

Even Reno looked at her curiously as she crept into his stable, closed the door and switched on the light. Perhaps he could see the strange, suspicious gleam in her eyes.

Pam took a swift look at the pencil. It was certainly the twin image of the one Ramon had taken from Paula. The only difference was that the clip was missing, as she had noticed while Manuel was writing. That, of course, might bear out Paula's explanation. But Pam seemed to remember something else . . . .

She opened Reno's saddlebag and dived her hand amongst the miscellaneous odds and ends. Her memory hadn't tricked her.

She drew out a small gilt clip. A pencil clip!

Paula had lied. This was her own pencil. This clip belonged to it. This was the pencil Ramon had taken from her and dropped into his saddlebag. The clip had been jolted off while he was riding.

Grim excitement tingled in Pam's veins. Why had Paula lied? How had she or her friend Manuel recovered possession of the pencil? It was part of the so-called "booty" that had vanished. How could they have found the pencil unless they knew where the booty was hidden? Was it possible they'd had a hand themselves in hiding it?

Pam switched off the light and hurried out of the stable. Her pulses were racing. That find had thrown a new light on the mystery. Ramon was not the only one involved. Paula Mario was also up to some mysterious game! Paula knew more than——

Pam's thoughts snapped off. She heard voices in the garden . . . she heard soft footsteps approaching. She recognised Paula's voice.

Pam stood rock still behind the cover of a shrubbery.

Peeping between the leaves she made out the figures of Paula Mario and Manuel Santez. They passed almost within touching distance of her. Their voices were low, but Pam caught a fragment of what Paula was saying. And it was a vital fragment!

"We'll beat it while our luck's good. If they searched the pagoda——"

The rest Pam lost. Paula and her companion passed on, making straight for the pagoda at the far end of the grounds.

What was their secret there?

That was what Pam meant to find out, and as soon as they were at a safe distance, she stole out of hiding and softly followed them.

The pagoda was a solidly built summer-

house, popular in the daytime, deserted now.

Keeping under cover of the trees, Pam saw the pair disappear in the shadows of the porch. Judging them both to be inside, she crept forward—she crept to the side of the pagoda and peered in through the window.

Then her eyes nearly dropped out of her head.

A box stood on the table. Paula was in the act of opening it, and in fascinated horror Pam recognised its contents. They were unmistakable.

Money and jewellery ! The plunder from the hotel safe ! Wads of banknotes—cases of expensive jewellery kept in security for the guests ! The plunder Ramon was said to have stolen ! It was here in the possession of Paula and——

" So you spy ! " a voice rasped in Pam's ear.

She whirled round with a cry. Too late ! Her wrist was seized as in a vice, and she found herself gazing into the cold, smiling face of Manuel Santez.

" You have seen so much, now you shall stay ! " he mocked her.

He marched her into the pagoda, closing the door behind him, standing with his back to it.

" Ramon's Engleesh friend ! " he announced.

Pam made a wild struggle to escape. Paula darted behind her. There was the click of a key in the lock. With all her strength Pam wrenched herself free of Manuel's grip and tugged frantically at the door. But it was locked. Paula stood smiling with the key in her hand.

" Ramon isn't the only one who enjoys a joke, you see ! " she taunted.

" This is no joke ! " Pam said angrily. " You two are the thieves ! It was you who robbed the safe——"

" And Ramon who'll get the blame for it ! " mocked Paula. " Did you think I didn't appreciate his little joke to-night, Pam Wendon ? Believe me, nothing could have suited me better ! Manuel's never rifled a safe so smoothly before. The job was made so easy for him, with a suspected thief on the premises ! "

Pam's brain spun. She realised now why Paula had whipped up suspicion against Ramon. Paula was a thief, Manuel Santez was her accomplice. They had only come here tonight to commit robbery. They had taken advantage of Ramon's hoax. They had made him their scapegoat !

" The evidence will be very black against Ramon ! " smiled Manuel " He is known to have robbed the girls. I took the precaution of hiding their belongings so that he could not return them, you understand, Pamela ? The safe has now been robbed. You—his partner—will be found locked up in this pagoda. Everyone will say that Ramon did that because he did not trust you. In time, possibly, you will be able to clear him of the charge. But by then, my Engleesh senorita, Paula and I will be safely across the border with our very excellent haul ! "

" The biggest we've ever made ! " breathed Paula. " Time we were getting away now. Are the boys here yet, Manuel ? "

" I hear them now ! "

He took the key from her, turned it in the lock, and gently edged open the door.

Pam sprang towards it—then fell back, hope annihilated.

A band of young desperadoes crept into the pagoda, softly as cats. They had rifles slung over their shoulders. The leader spoke out of the side of his mouth to Manuel :

" Okay, chief ! We got the coach waiting now ! "

His slinky eyes went to Pam.

" Who's this ? "

" A friend of Ramon's who we're leaving behind under lock and key," tittered Paula, and turned goadingly to Pam. " I'm afraid you'll be sitting out for the rest of the dance. Sure you'll be comfortable here ? "

" You invited yourself, after all ! " mocked Manuel, taking the key from the inside of the lock.

Anger choked Pam. She was helpless. They were going now. She must watch them walk out with their booty under her very eyes, leaving Ramon incriminated

and herself locked up in this pagoda without a hope of being found for hours !

" Sorry you'll miss the tango competition with Ramon," gibed Paula, her hand reaching for the box on the table. " But he couldn't wait, anyhow. We made the place too hot to hold him——"

" Who said so ? " came a cheerful voice.

There was a crash as the window burst open and a boyish figure leapt in.

It was Ramon !

Pam gave a cry of delight, but Paula and her rascally associates were for a moment too amazed by the young Mexican's sensational arrival on the scene to do more than gape.

Apparently oblivious of the dangerous situation which confronted him, Ramon greeted Pam with a cheery smile, then strode across to the table beside which Paula stood, still clutching the box that contained the stolen bank-notes and jewellery.

He treated the girl to a mocking bow.

" Pardon, senorita," he said, " but I think that will be safer in my care."

Furiously Paula glared at him.

" Don't you dare——" she began, only to finish with a helpless splutter, for gently yet firmly the young Mexican had forced the box from her grasp. Tucking it under his arm, he turned and made for where Pam stood, watching the audacious action of Ramon as if in a dream, but, suddenly, Manuel and the other robbers roused themselves.

" Seize him ! " roared Manuel. " He shall pay dearly for his impudence."

And, snatching at his revolver, he hurled himself forward. There came an anxious cry from Pam :

" Ramon—oh, look out ! "

But she need not have worried. The young Mexican knew how to take care of himself. Even as the robber gang plunged towards him, he lashed out with the heavy box he carried.

Crack !

It thudded over Manuel's head, and he dropped to the floor with a howl. The others, unable to pull up in time, tripped over him, and in a moment all was confusion.

Still smiling nonchalantly, Ramon again tucked the box under one arm, then smiled across at Pam.

" I fear this is no place for a young lady," he observed. " Let us depart."

He led her across the room, then, placing a strong arm around her, he swung her on to the window-sill.

From Paula there came a desperate shout, and furiously she gestured to Manuel and Co., now dazedly scrambling to their feet.

" Quick—you fools ! " she shrilled. " Are you going to let them get away ? "

The gang rushed forward again, but already Ramon, Pam in his arms, had poised himself for a jump. Pam caught a fleeting glimpse of Reno, Ramon's horse, waiting outside below, then she was dropping downwards.

Next second Ramon was in the saddle, he was holding her in front of him, and clop, clop ! clop, clop ! they were galloping away across the grounds almost before Pam knew it.

But not before Manuel and his gang knew all about it !

Crack—crack, crack !

Rifles rang out. Bullets whistled.

" Duck, Pam-eela ! " gasped Ramon.

Crack, crack—crack—crack !

The din was deafening. The bullets shrieked in the air. Pam all but stopped breathing.

Ramon crouched low over her—protecting her—laughing at the crazy marksmanship, laughing encouragement. He swung the horse this way and that way in a zig-zag gallop, and he pulled up safely at the terrace steps as the manager and guests came rushing out of the hotel.

" What is happening ? What is the shooting ? Who is this ? " cried the distracted manager.

" Ramon Video, at your service ! " was the jaunty answer.

" Ramon—— What ? "

Ramon slid down from the saddle extending a chivalrous hand to Pam. Then carelessly he handed the box to the manager.

" Here is Ramon. Here is your property stolen from the safe. And there "—he

jerked his head in the direction of the pagoda—" are the thieves, the Manuel Escargo gang, just making off in the coach."

" Manuel Escargo——" The manager jumped three feet in the air. " Those villains have been here? It was they—they who robbed me? You say they have gone? "

" They will not get far. I took the precaution of loosening the wheels of their coach ! " Ramon chuckled. " I believe you have already sent for the militia, Senor Manager? They should catch their prey somewhere near the Witch's Hump, I imagine. I am sorry to miss the fun, but my partner and I will be otherwise engaged ! "

With his arm round Pam's waist, he swept her past the electrified guests into the hotel.

" Ramon ! " Pam heard herself saying dizzily. " So this is why you've been disappearing in clouds of mystery all the evening ! "

" I thought I recognised Manuel Escargo as soon as I arrived here, Pam-eela. I watched him, I shadowed him. My only sorrow was that I had to neglect you. Forgeeve me ! "

" But——"

" When you told me that Paula's partner was the son of a noble count, then "—Ramon said gaily—" I knew I was not mistaken. Manuel always adopts high rank. It ees his stock-in-trade, as you say in Engleesh. But it ees due to you as much as to me that he has done vairee bad trade to-night ! "

" But, Ramon, when you dashed away when Paula came into the buffet——"

" That was because Manuel was not with her. What was he up to? I must find out. I did—only not before he had already rifled the safe. But why do we talk about this now, Pam-eela? " Ramon hurried on merrily. " The band plays—it ees ten-thirty. You and I dance, now, in the tango competition ! "

" Do you really want to, Ramon? " she teased him.

" Want to? "

" You said to-night you were longing for wilder excitement, you incorrigible bandit ! "

" I long only to dance with you, Pam-eela, and to win ! " he laughed, as he whirled her into the ballroom. " With my leetle Engleesh partner, how can I help but win ! "

Ramon was a superb dancer, and there was never any doubt as to the result of the tango competition.

As the music died away, there came an outbreak of applause all round the ballroom; applause which was renewed when, later on, it was announced that Pam and her partner were the winners.

It was Marquita who presented the prizes. Pam, oddly enough, won a gold pencil. It reminded her that she still had Paula's pencil—so she turned to toss it on to the chair that Paula had occupied. There was a shout from the girls. And there, under that chair, lay the articles Ramon had purloined from them in the coach.

Ramon didn't notice that little burst of excitement. He was showing Pam, jubilantly, a cheque for a hundred dollars —presented to him by the grateful hotel manager.

" It ees a lot of money for us, Pam-eela."

" For YOU, Ramon."

" No, for both of us ! " Ramon insisted cheerfully. " We are partnairs, Pam-eela. We shall always be partnairs ! "

THE END

Her Amazing ONE-DAY ROLE

Roberta and Benny were twins, so it was easy for Roberta to disguise herself as her brother. But would she be able to hoodwink the boys at Benny's school all afternoon?

By DORIS GRAHAM

CHAPTER I

SHE TOOK HER BROTHER'S PLACE!

"So this is Croftburn!"

And the boyish figure paused in the drive, gazing up admiringly at the fine old building. Then a surprisingly unboyish giggle followed.

"Gosh, what a joke! Peter will never guess who I really am in a million years—or, at least, until six o'clock to-night!"

And Roberta Barnes, Bobbie to all her friends, picked up her large suitcase and continued her way up the drive, a broad grin still on her face.

Actually Bobbie's twin brother, Benny, should have been the one to approach the school on this first day of the new term, and his first day at Croftburn, where it had been arranged that he should enter the Fourth Form and share a study with his cousin, Peter.

It was over a year since the two boys had met, and the mischievous twins had hatched up a scheme to hoax him. And of all their scatterbrain ideas, this was surely the worst.

For Bobbie, who to-morrow would be entering the neighbouring girls' school, had declared that she could take Benny's place at Croftburn for the day without being bowled out. Benny had eagerly agreed, on condition that the loser treated the winner and friends to a feed in the school tuckshop.

But Roberta was determined not to give herself away. Indeed, she had everything in her favour, for on the first day of term there were no lessons, and very few masters

about. She just had to keep up her hoax until six o'clock, when Benny would appear to change places with her.

" I'll jolly well see that I'm not bowled out," declared Bobbie to herself. Then, looking up, she felt her heart begin to thud a little, for hurrying towards her was a tanned, good-looking boy, a smile of welcome on his freckled face.

" Benny ! " he cried, grabbing Bobbie's hand and giving it a grip that made her wince. " I didn't expect you till to-night. Gee, you haven't altered a bit—though I don't know," he added reflectively, " you seem to have got a bit thinner. And you haven't got a scrap taller. Still, we'll soon have you bulging with muscles." And, sparring with his fists, he made a playful swipe at Roberta, catching her under the chin with a blow that made her teeth rattle.

" Here," began Bobbie indignantly, in a shrill falsetto, which, catching Peter's look of surprise, she hurriedly changed to something like Benny's deep bass. " Let's wait till to-morrow before we start boxing. You may get a surprise."

And Bobbie chuckled. For Benny, though Peter did not know it, had been champion boxer at his old school.

" Cheers, I like surprises," beamed Peter. " I say, let's barge over to the tuckshop. All the chaps are over there, and I can do a bit of introducing."

" Suits me," replied Roberta. " Lead me to it ! "

There were quite a number of boys in the tuckshop when the cousins got there, though the majority would not be arriving until the evening train.

They were a jolly crowd, but by the time introductions were over Roberta began to fear that her right hand would be useless for the next few days. Also, her voice caused her quite a bit of trouble, shooting up suddenly when she laughed.

But apparently the boys suspected nothing, and Roberta breathed in relief.

" Well, that's the lot," said Peter at her side. " Now what about a glass of our special fizz, to celebrate your first day at school ? Gather round, fellows, the round's on me ! "

" Does that include me ? " said a voice behind him.

And Bobbie, turning, saw a rather fat, pasty-faced boy looking at Peter, a sneer on his face.

" No, Buller, it doesn't," said Peter quietly. " We never have exactly yearned for each other's company, and I see no reason to start now."

" Oh, don't you ? " snapped Buller, a red flush running up into his sallow cheeks. " Well, think again, Mr. Clever. I want your company outside for a few minutes, and if you don't want trouble you'd better come."

" Oh, push off ! " snapped Peter, and, turning his back, gave in his order.

For a moment Buller stood there, an angry glare on his face. And instinctively Bobbie moved a little nearer to him, ready to trip him up if he showed signs of causing trouble.

But Buller was not that type. With a glare at Peter he turned and strode off.

Bobbie, looking after him, felt a strange uneasiness creeping over her. For Buller, though discomfited by Peter's words, had a nasty look in his eyes as he seated himself at the other side of the tuckshop.

" Goodness, I hope he's not going to start anything," she thought alarmedly. " I'd just have to help Peter if a fight started, and I'm sure I'd shriek or something."

Roberta felt quite faint at the thought, and hurriedly drained her glass, at the same time firmly resolving that she would stick like a limpet to Peter until six o'clock that evening, and keep him and Buller apart whatever happened.

" Peter," she said quickly, " can't we go for a long walk somewhere ? I've got heaps of questions to ask you, and lots to tell you."

" 'Fraid not, old man," replied Peter. " We're not allowed out of gates to-day. But if you're so keen on a bit of exercise, why not a game of footer ? All the togs are in the pavilion——"

" Golly ! No—no ! " yelped Bobbie frantically, trying to make herself heard above the enthusiastic cries that arose. " At least, I don't mind watching you

others play, but—well, I might not play the same way as you."

"Oh, rot," replied one of the boys. "Everybody plays football the same way. And it's a good opportunity to see how you shape. Come on!"

"But really——" protested Roberta weakly, as Peter grabbed her arm and commenced to pull her towards the door. "I—I can't! I——"

And then to Roberta's intense relief there was an interruption. A small boy approached Peter, handed him a note. With a surprised look Peter took it, read it. Then Roberta, watching him, saw his face pale.

"Sorry, chaps," he said quietly. "I—I've got to see somebody for a few minutes. Shan't be long."

And before anyone could question him he had slipped out of the tuckshop, but not before he had savagely crumpled the note and thrown it to the floor.

"Funny," mused a boy nicknamed Sandy. "Old Peter looked quite upset."

"Yes, didn't he," replied Bobbie. "Anyway, I think I'll wait here until he comes back. What about another drink?"

Roberta felt weak with relief as the boys agreed, though she now had something else to worry her.

Why had Peter turned so white? What was in that note to upset him? And as those thoughts entered her mind she automatically turned towards the table where Buller had been seated. And a feeling of alarm shot through her as she saw that the bully was no longer there.

In that instant Roberta's mind was made up. She was going to find out what was in that note; find out what had upset Peter, and see if she could help in any way.

Unobtrusively she shuffled the screwed-up note along with her foot, at the same time dropping her change on the floor.

"Blow!" she said, stooping quickly to retrieve it, at the same time snatching up the note and ramming it in her pocket.

At the first opportunity she drew it out again, and quickly read through the pencilled scrawl.

"If you don't want to see Derek chucked out of the school, meet me at once in the shrubbery behind the tuckshop.—Buller." Bobbie started. Derek, Peter's brother in the Sixth Form, who this year would be head-boy! What on earth did this note

"If you two boys have a grievance you can have it out properly in the school gym," declared the master. He did not realise that one of them was Roberta in disguise!

mean? And how could Buller get him expelled from the school?

Filled with alarm, Bobbie stared at the note. Then her chin squared.

"After all, I am their cousin," she said to herself, "and I think I've a right to butt in on this."

Quietly she slipped out of the tuck-shop, made her way to the shrubbery. Then she drew up sharply, a little gasp coming from her lips.

For quite plainly to her ears came the sound of a blow, a gasp of pain, then Peter's voice:

"You low-down cad! Is that the only way you can fight—when someone else is holding me?"

"That's the only way I choose to fight at the moment," sneered Buller's voice. "And here's another one for your cheek."

Again the sound of a blow, and a smothered exclamation from Peter.

Roberta's blood boiled. In an instant she was up in arms. She quite forgot the role she was playing; disregarded the danger into which she would be running.

She sprang forward, her eyes fairly blazing as she saw Peter standing there, held by a couple of grinning boys, whilst the gloating Buller hit out at him.

"You're going to do what I want, see!" grated Buller. "You know the consequences if you don't. And just to make you remember——"

Once more he drew back his fist. But before it could reach its mark a veritable tornado seemed to have hurtled upon him.

"You rotter!" panted Roberta, striking out wildly in all directions, clawing at the bully's hair with such force that he gave a bellow of pain. "Don't you dare touch Peter! You coward!"

She drew back, gasping for breath, cheeks blazing, eyes flashing, glaring ferociously at the bully.

But Buller, recovering from his initial surprise, glared back menacingly, his fat fists clenching.

"All right, whipper-snapper," he ground out. "You asked for it, and now you're going to get it!"

Roberta's knees seemed to turn to water. Oh, goodness, she thought frantically, now what had she landed herself in for? Why hadn't she managed things a bit better—somehow got Peter away from the bully without losing her temper like that?

She couldn't turn and run—couldn't possibly give Benny the reputation of a coward before he even entered the school.

Feebly she put up her fists, determined to ward Buller off somehow. Then almost swooned as a new voice broke in on the scene.

"Now, then, Buller, and you—what's your name?"

Almost sick with fright, Roberta stared up into the stern face of the young master who had so quietly approached.

"B-b-barnes," she stuttered feebly.

"Well, B-b-barnes," he retorted with a grim smile, "I'll have you know that I allow no fighting in the school grounds. If you two boys have a grievance, you can have it out properly in the school gym. Come on!"

CHAPTER II

MORE TROUBLE FOR ROBERTA

EYES full of apprehension, Bobbie took a look at Buller's ample form, and shuddered. While Buller, glancing at the slight Bobbie, grinned with delight.

Like most bullies he was a coward at heart, and in normal circumstances would make any excuse rather than stand up to a fight. But Bobbie seemed fair game even for his flabby muscles.

But next moment the smile was wiped off his face as the master, with a shrewd glance at the bully, spoke again.

"I know there's a big difference in your sizes," he remarked, "but I have your boxing record from your last school, Barnes. Apparently you were their champion, so you shouldn't have much trouble in standing up to Buller."

Buller's face turned a sickly yellow, and seeing his fear, a wild hope shot into Bobbie's heart. She knew she couldn't go on with this fight, but somehow she had got to get out of it without making things bad for Benny when he turned up.

As the little crowd marched across the quadrangle, she fell back a little until she was walking beside the quaking Buller.

" I'm sorry about this," she said pleasantly. " Of course, you didn't know about my boxing record, but it's not fair of them to match you against me."

She took a glance at the bully as she spoke, and despite her predicament gave a little grin as she saw his terrified face.

" Of course," she added, " I'll try and pull my punches as much as possible." Bobbie felt rather proud of that phrase, one which she had heard Benny use, it sounded so professional. " But, of course, once I get really worked up I'm likely to overlook the fact that I'm punching a human being."

" D-dud-do you punch very hard ? " stuttered the bully, shivering in apprehension.

" Oh, sure," replied Bobbie easily. " I usually burst one punch-ball a day. At my old school they used to call me Killer Barnes. That was a bit far-fetched, of course, but I managed to make a bit of a mess of some people."

And she gave such a sinister laugh that Buller stopped short, cold trickles of fear creeping up and down his spine.

" Still," added Bobbie, drawing him on again, " I'll try and aim for your face all the time. It might make you look a bit peculiar in future, but I don't think it would be so dangerous as one of my punches to the body."

Buller, staggering on, was visibly trembling now. Bobbie's heart leapt. Her ruse was working. Obviously all Buller wanted now was an excuse for getting out of this fight—and she was going to provide that excuse.

Just ahead was an upjutting tree root. Taking a friendly hold on Buller's arm she guided his stumbling footsteps towards it and, just as he reached it, gave him a slight push.

Buller's foot caught in the root, pitching him forward to the ground. It could only have shaken him slightly, but after his first yell of surprise a crafty look shot into his eyes. A bellow burst from his lips, then changed to an agonised moan as he clasped his ankle.

" Oh crumbs ! It's broken ! I can't stand."

The master, turning, strode back.

" Stop making that noise," he snapped testily. " What's the matter with you, boy ? "

" Oh, sir, it's my ankle. Ooh ! "

" Perhaps he's twisted his ankle, sir," ventured Bobbie.

" Well, help him into the school," rapped the master. " Obviously he can't fight if he has a twisted ankle." But it was a very suspicious glance he shot at the bully before striding off down the quadrangle.

" Don't bother, chaps," said Buller in a weak, heroic voice. " I'll be all right."

" You bet you will ! " snapped Peter savagely. " You're a cad, Buller. You wouldn't fight because you were afraid of my cousin making mincemeat of you."

" That's it," broke in Bobbie hotly, forgetting caution as her anger against the bully returned. " He only likes fighting people when they have their hands tied behind their back."

Buller's small eyes narrowed. Forgetting his injury, he jumped to his feet, glaring at the two before him.

" All right, Barnes," he said thickly, " I'll get my own back on you before lights out. As for you," he added, turning to Peter, " I told you I wanted a certain something by to-morrow. Well, for your cheek, I've altered the time limit. I want it this evening—or you know what'll happen."

All the fight, the fury, went out of Peter in an instant. His eyes had a trapped, hunted look. But without another word he turned on his heel and strode off. Straight to his study he went, Bobbie following, and slumped down into an armchair, burying his face in his hands.

For a long moment Bobbie stood staring at him, a feeling of anger against the bully surging within her. Then quietly she approached.

" Why don't you tell me what's the matter, Peter ? " she said softly. " I might be able to help. I know it's something to do with Derek."

And she told him of the note she had read.

" Well, if you know that much, I guess you may as well know it all," said Peter

bitterly. " There's an inn down the road. Perhaps you saw it as you came along ? "

As Roberta nodded, he continued :

" It's kept by a chap named Stringer—a real rotter. He used to encourage some of the chaps down there to gamble at cards, till the Head found out and said that the next person to have anything to do with Stringer would be expelled."

" Peter," Roberta gasped, " you—you don't mean that Derek——"

" Buller's managed to get hold of a letter—it's in Derek's handwriting, saying that the gambling debt will be paid as soon as possible." Peter winced again.

" But what does Buller want you to do ? " asked Roberta concernedly.

" He wants me to give him five pounds for the letter. He knows I keep the sports fund, and says I can take the money out of that. If I don't give him the money by to-night he's going to take the letter to the Head. And that," he finished gruffly, " means the boot for Derek ! "

" Oh, gosh ! " Roberta exclaimed. " Peter, what can we do ? We must get that letter somehow ? "

" How ? " asked Peter glumly. " Buller's hanging on to that all right. I can't believe that old Derek would do such a thing." And his boyish voice broke a little. " But I can't let him be expelled. I shall just have to give Buller what he wants, and try to repay the money myself.

" And get found out before it's repaid," flashed Bobbie. " And then you'll be the one to get expelled. No, Peter ! There must be some other way. Look, promise me you'll wait until this evening before doing anything ! "

" Well, I don't see what good it does," replied Peter bitterly. " But Buller will wait until six o'clock."

" Good enough ! That gives us just three hours." For a few moments Roberta stood there, her brain working desperately as she tried to think of some way of outwitting Buller and saving Derek.

Then, very quietly, without disturbing Peter, she slipped out. Once out in the corridor she looked quickly round. A very small boy was passing and at her inquiry gave her the number of Buller's study.

Heart thudding rather uncomfortably, Roberta made her way there. A surly voice bade her enter as she knocked and, as she entered the study, Buller, seated there alone, hastily put an envelope into his pocket.

" Here, what do you want ? " he growled.

" I—I wanted to see you," said Bobbie hastily, her eyes desperately roving the room. " It's about Peter."

" Has he sent the money ? " asked Buller eagerly. " If so, he can have the letter." And quickly his hand went to the pocket of his jacket.

" Well, n-no, not exactly ! " Casually she strolled round the table, blinking a little apprehensively at the bully as, with a snort of rage, he subsided into the chair again, glaring at her.

" Well, stop wandering about," he rapped, for by this time Bobbie was almost behind his chair. " What did you come here for ? "

" Just this," replied Bobbie, and in a twinkling had snatched the cloth from the table, had flung it over Buller's head.

With a muffled roar he raised his hands to tear it off. Skilfully, Bobbie twisted the end of the cloth round his raised arms, tying it deftly in a knot behind the chair. She was trembling now with reaction, but desperately she thrust her hand into the writhing bully's pocket. Her heart leapt as her hand closed upon the letter.

Then, before Buller could twist himself free, she was out of the door, locking it on the outside. Out of the school she pelted, looking desperately around for some place where she would be concealed from searching eyes.

Once more the shrubbery behind the tuckshop served a useful purpose. Quickly she opened the letter out, read it through. Then her eyes widened, a puzzled frown came to her forehead.

" There's something jolly fishy here," she muttered to herself. Once again she glanced at the note, then her face took on a resolute look. " There's only one way of clearing this up," she said softly, " and that's to see Mr. Stringer in person."

Bobbie knew she would be taking a terrible risk, knew what the consequences would be if she were discovered going to the inn. Just for a moment she hesitated, remembering that Benny would be the one to suffer ; the one booked for expulsion.

" Still, he'd be just as anxious to clear this up," she said to herself. " And, anyway, I'll take jolly good care I'm not caught."

She left the school grounds through a hole in the hedge—obviously used on many occasions by school law-breakers. Then, keeping to the fields, made her way towards the inn.

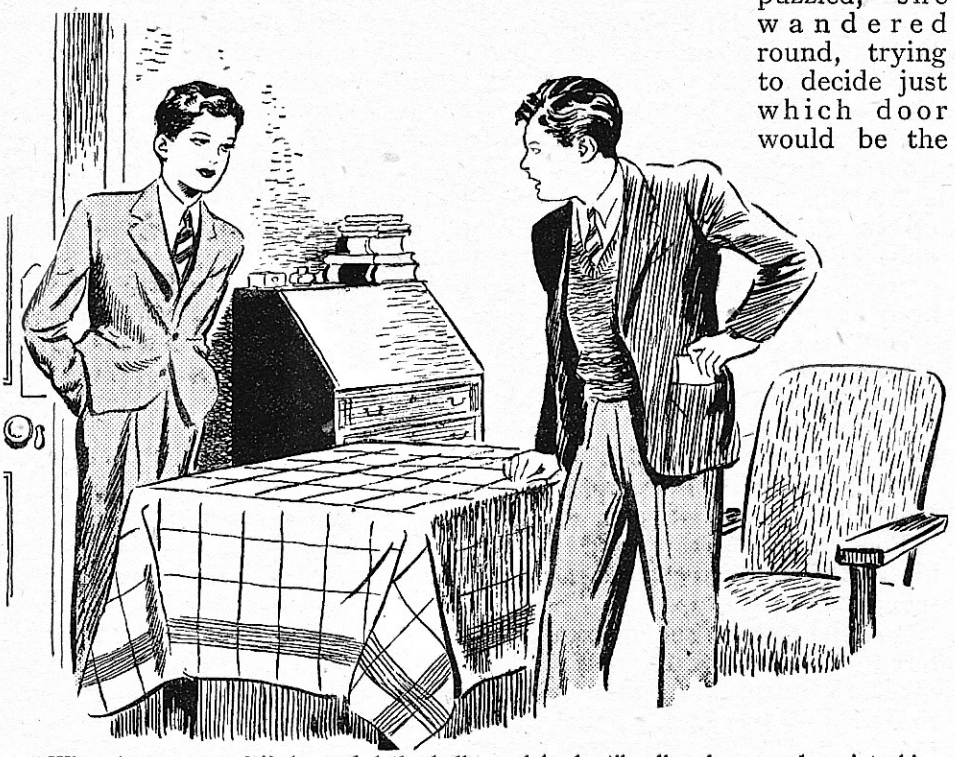
She kept a very wary look-out, but no sign of anyone could she see. And Bobbie's spirits began to rise. All along she had felt sure, as Peter had, that Derek could not have done the thing of which Buller was accusing him. He was too straight for that ; Bobbie hoped to learn quite a lot at this interview with Stringer.

Quickly she hurried on. She did not see Buller suddenly duck down behind the hedge on the other side of the field. But on Buller's face was a startled look, which changed to one of malicious triumph as he saw the direction which Roberta was taking.

" That footpath only leads to one place," he muttered vengefully. " I said I'd pay you out before lights out, and here's my chance ! "

Very quietly he slipped off, entered the telephone booth just outside the school grounds. When he left it a little later there was a gloating look on his mean face, which changed to one of sneering delight as, some minutes afterwards, he watched a large car swinging out of the gates.

Meanwhile, Roberta had just reached the inn, which looked very shabby, very deserted at this time in the afternoon. Rather puzzled, she wandered round, trying to decide just which door would be the best one to try. The one at the side decided her, for it was out of view of the road.



" What do you want ? " demanded the bully, and he hastily slipped an envelope into his pocket. The disguised Roberta's heart gave an anxious leap. How could she get possession of that letter ?

Very excited now, she raised her hand to knock. But before her fist could touch the panels a stern voice sounded behind her.

" Boy ! Do you realise what you are doing ? How dare you flout my orders in this fashion ? "

A hand gripped her shoulder with a

grasp that made her wince, flung her round.

"Come! Get into my car! I will deal with you at school!"

And in the grip of the headmaster of Croftburn, the white-faced Roberta was almost flung into the car and whizzed back to the school.

CHAPTER III

LOCKED IN THE PUNISHMENT-ROOM

ROBERTA shuddered every time she thought of that ride back to school. The Head's cold anger had made her quake. She had failed dismally in what she had set out to do. Not only that, but the Head now had the letter which she had managed to wrest from Buller.

"And here am I," she groaned, "locked up in the punishment-room. Goodness only knows what will happen to me—especially if the Head finds out how I've been deceiving him."

And Bobbie shuddered again. What a mess she'd made of everything. Derek would surely be expelled now; the Head had hinted as much before sending her to the punishment-room.

And suddenly all thoughts of her own troubles disappeared from Bobbie's mind.

Poor old Derek! He'd just attained his ambition to become head-boy of the school—now disgrace!

"And I'm positive he's innocent," muttered Bobbie. "I know if only I could speak to Stringer, if I could persuade him to tell the truth, I should find there's some explanation for that letter, some proof that Derek's not the rotter Buller tried to make out."

But how could she see Stringer? What a hopeless proposition that seemed now.

Frantically Bobbie looked about her, wondering if there were any way of escape. But the window was high and barred. The door was locked. Hopeless!

She heard footsteps passing along the passage outside. Quickly Roberta bent down, putting her eye to the keyhole, wondering if it could be Peter coming to speak to her. But the footsteps passed on. For a moment Roberta felt sick with disappointment, then suddenly she started.

The key was in the lock outside, obviously forgotten by the Head when he had strode off so angrily. If only she could get someone to turn it. Then suddenly remembrance flashed upon Bobbie of a trick Benny had once showed her. A thrill of excitement shot through her as once again she glanced round the sparsely furnished apartment.

In a second she had ripped the sheet off the narrow little bed in the corner, with hands that trembled she carefully folded it and pushed it under the door, hoping frantically that nobody else would stroll along the corridor at this moment.

Next she took out the nail file which, even in her masquerade as Benny, she had not forgotten to carry. She bent down, prodding hard at the key.

Just as she was beginning to despair there came a little plop outside. Roberta could hardly suppress her cheer of relief as, pulling the sheet carefully back under the door, she found the key lying on it.

In a second she had swung open the door, closing it carefully behind her.

Down the stairs she slipped, dodging quickly every time she heard footsteps approaching. Fortunately, very few people knew what had happened that afternoon, so she felt reasonably safe.

The only really tricky part was to get past the Head's study. Heart in mouth, Bobbie crept along the passage. Then, outside the door she stopped dead, panic gripping her.

For very plainly to her ears came the Head's angry voice.

"It is quite plain from this letter, which I found on young Barnes, that Derek Simms has been guilty of a most flagrant breach of rules. He well knows the penalty for that. Please go and fetch him at once."

"Yes, sir!" answered a voice from inside the room, and footsteps rapidly approached the door.

The sound galvanised Bobbie into activity. White-faced, she sped on down the corridor, and once more made her way

towards the inn. This time, fortunately, unseen.

. . . . .

In the Head's study a very pale Derek Simms stood, Peter beside him. And on the other side of the room a gloating Frank Buller.

" I've told you, sir, that I did send that letter to Stringer," said Derek firmly, " but I repeat, I have never been in the inn."

" And yet you will give me no explanation," rapped the Head.

" I'm sorry, sir, but I can't."

The Head sighed.

" I find it difficult to believe such a thing of you, Simms, but you leave me no alternative. In the circumstances, much as I regret it, I shall have to carry out my threat——"

" But you can't ! " Peter's agonised voice broke in. " Please, sir, don't do that. Don't expel Derek. Derek," he added wildly, " why won't you explain—tell us what the mystery is ? "

" Because there's nothing to explain," broke in Buller. " The thing's as plain as a pikestaff."

" Buller, silence ! " rapped the Head. " You still have quite a lot of explaining to do yourself, my boy. I want to know how you got this letter in the first place."

" And why he tried to make me give him five pounds for it," broke in Peter, bitterly.

" Wh-a-t ! " The Head almost leapt from his chair, whilst Buller, pallid and cringing, shrank back.

But before anyone else could speak there came a knock at the door. It swung open, and into the room stepped Roberta, a seedy-looking man behind her.

The Head blinked dazedly.

" Barnes ! How did you get here ? I left you locked in the punishment-room. And who is this—this person you have with you ? "

" Please, sir," said Roberta in a scared voice, " I—I got out of the punishment-room. You see I had to. I knew Derek was innocent, and I had to get to Stringer to see if he could help. And he can ! " she added joyfully, beaming around the room.

A gleam of hope shot into Peter's eyes. Buller looked as if he would like to faint. But Derek, with a smothered cry, leapt forward, grabbed Stringer by the arm and shook him roughly.

" No ! " he rapped. " No, remember I have your word."

" But it's all right now, guv'nor," said Stringer hastily. " I heard from the other young gentleman over the holidays. He's got his job now——"

" Will someone," interposed the Head icily, " please explain things to me ? I must confess I'm completely baffled."

" Yes, sir ! " Roberta piped in eagerly.

And quickly she went on to explain to the Head just what had happened since she arrived at the school that afternoon.

" Directly I got the letter from Buller and looked at it, I thought there was something peculiar about it," she finished. " It didn't read as though Derek could owe the money, for he wasn't even sure about how much was owing. And if he had lost the money to Stringer, he surely would have known how much he lost. Anyway, I knew that Stringer was the only person who could really clear things up, that was why I had to see him."

" That's right, sir," piped in Stringer. " This young gentleman's never been to my inn," he added, jerking his thumb towards Derek. " It was one of the other boys who left last term. He couldn't pay me what he owed me, and I said I'd tell you——" He had the grace to colour a little as he said that. " I sent him several letters, saying I wanted the money, then during the holidays I got this letter from Mr. Simms, sending it on."

" And who was this other boy ? " asked the Head.

" It was Buller's brother, sir," answered Derek quietly. " You remember he was after an important job. He would never have stood a chance if he had been expelled from school, and I promised him I'd keep quiet about everything until he'd got the job "

" Even at the risk of being expelled yourself ? H'm ! " said the Head.

"Well, I could always have explained later on," said Derek rather uncomfortably.

" And Buller," put in Roberta eagerly, " went to the inn to see if he could get the I O U his brother had left there, without knowing that the debt had been paid. And that's where he found Derek's letter."

" And so tried a nasty little game of his own," said the Head sternly. " For that, Buller, you will be severely punished. As for you," he added, turning to Roberta, " you have broken many rules this afternoon. Also, you have broken out of the punishment-room. I cannot be too severe with you, partly because you are a new boy, and partly because you acted from the best of motives. You will write a hundred lines. Now you can all go—except you, Buller."

Totteringly, Roberta went, and the delighted Peter and Derek followed her.

Once outside the headmaster's study the two boys stopped, and impulsively Derek grasped Roberta by the hand.

" Thanks for all you did," he cried. " I'll always be grateful to you for butting in like that. You just about saved my bacon."

" Rather ! " exclaimed Peter, and he gave Bobbie a hearty slap across the shoulders—one which sent her staggering.

" Hi, steady on ! " she gasped. " No need to be so jolly rough. I'm——" Then she broke off, flushing uncomfortably as she realised that the older boy was gazing at her sharply, a curious gleam in his eyes. " What—what's the matter ? " she stammered, suddenly uneasy.

He shrugged.

" Nothing," he replied. " I was only a bit taken back by the queer way your voice keeps jumping up and down. Golly," he ended with a laugh, " for a moment I actually thought it was a girl talking."

Roberta gave a shaky laugh.

" How absurd ! " she exclaimed, and then gave a sigh of relief as she heard the school clock strike the hour.

It was six o'clock. Her audacious impersonation was at an end.

" Hey, come with me ! " she cried, and, grabbing the surprised Peter by the hand, she hurried him down the corridor, along to his study.

His surprise when he reached there was ludicrous.

For seated in the armchair was another boy—identical with the one who was holding his arm, save that the newcomer was slightly bigger.

" Well, you win ! " he said, rising to his feet, and grinning at the exultant Roberta.

" You bet I do ! " she said in her normal voice—at which Peter stared even more. " And the feed's on you ! "

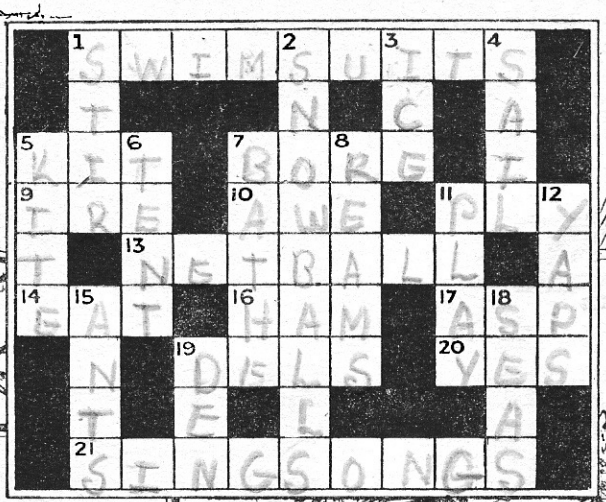
" Then—then you're not Benny ? " stuttered Peter, staring at her.

" Not guilty ! " grinned Roberta. " I took you all in, didn't I ? "

" I'll say you did," replied her cousin admiringly. " But all I can say is, if old Benny's as good a sport as you are, he's going to make a jolly fine study-mate ! "

At which Roberta blushed.

A Holiday CROSSWORD



CLUES

Across :

1. They are worn in the water (9)
5. Campers—and soldiers—carry theirs in a bag (3)
7. An unwelcome person at any party (4)
9. Anger (3)
10. A feeling sometimes inspired in sightseers (3)
11. It describes wood and wool (3)
13. Favourite winter game for schoolgirls (7)
14. A jumbled tea (3)
16. Makes lovely sandwiches ! (3)
17. You won't find this snake in England (3)
19. Reverse a vehicle used in snowy weather (4)
20. It is certainly not in the negative (3)
21. Camp-fire concerts (9)

Down :

1. To do this—use a spoon (4)
2. Ammunition for wintry mock battles (9)
3. Cold and slippery (3)
4. If you're going boating you may need this (4)
5. Children love to fly this (4)
6. Your house when camping (4)
7. A seaside holiday wouldn't be complete without one daily (5)
8. A large supply of paper (5)
11. You do this on holiday—you may also see one ! (4)
12. A small dog barks (4)
15. Mind these insects don't get amongst your picnic tea ! (4)
18. Bathers beware when these are high ! (4)
19. Wild beast's lair (3)

(*You will find the solution on page* 180.)

WILD DOG of the Snows

They said the leader of Shirley Linton's dog team was a killer and not to be trusted. But Shirley refused to believe it. She had implicit faith in Blaze, and with his help she meant to win the Five-Mile Sleigh Race.

By SYLVIA MACRAE

CHAPTER I

THE THREAT TO HER PET

"WELL done! You beauties, you did that last half-mile in record time, so now for the reward I promised you."

Bringing her sleigh to a slithering halt in the snow, Shirley Linton gazed in happy approval at the double line of huskies harnessed before her, then, flinging back the fur rug which covered the sleigh, she produced a pail containing ice-cold fish.

Instantly from five of the huskies came an excited yapping, and frantically they plunged and strained in their eagerness to get to the pail. But the sixth—the leader, a magnificent grey dog with a long, wolf-like head—gave a menacing, commanding snarl. Like magic the yapping died away, and the huskies fell back into their line again.

Shirley laughed.

"Well done, old Blaze!" she exclaimed. "You're the one to teach them good manners!"

She fed the fish to the sleigh-team, but the two largest herrings she reserved for the wolf-like dog she had called Blaze, and as he ate them she proudly fondled his furry ruff.

"And to think that you were a stray—an outcast—until I found you roaming about and adopted you," she said. "You, the finest team leader in the whole of Alaska! It'll be thanks to you if I win the Five Mile Race to-morrow. You will see that I do win, won't you, honey? It may make all the difference, not only to me, but to dad as well."

Blaze looked up from his fish, and his greenish-yellow eyes glowed intelligently, just as if he had understood every word

Shirley again ran her gauntleted hand through the long, silky fur at his neck, and patted him affectionately.

A great bond of friendship had sprung up between Blaze and herself, despite the fact that until a few weeks ago the wolf-like husky had been a wild dog.

He had been half-starved when Shirley had found him roaming aimlessly about in the snow. She had bathed and bandaged his injured fore-leg, ignoring his suspicious, menacing growls, and had taken him home.

Over-ruling her father's objections that the wild dog was not to be trusted, she had fed him and cared for him, and now he was her biggest chum, eager to obey her every command.

As she fondled his head, a sigh escaped her lips.

She was thinking of the urgent letter which her trapper father had written yesterday—a letter asking the bank in Pine City to make him a loan so that he could pay off the mortgage which, owing to bad times, he had taken up on the homestead and land he owned in this lonely part of Alaska.

If he failed, Shirley would lose the only home she had ever known. Unless——

Her eyes gleamed as brightly as Blaze's. Unless she could win the hundred dollar prize offered to the successful competitor in the annual sleigh race. That money wouldn't be sufficient to pay off the mortgage, but it would at least give them a respite from their money troubles.

" I must win—I *will* win," she told herself confidently, as she returned the empty pail to the sleigh. " Blaze has made all the difference to the team."

She smiled as she picked up the long whip and prepared to continue the journey homeward. She loved huskies ; was never happier than when mushing along the frozen trail with them, and it had always been her ambition to enter a team of her own in the annual race. But it had been a difficult job to secure her father's permission, for years ago he had been crippled as the result of being attacked by a husky that had turned on him. Ever since he had mistrusted huskies, especially those like Blaze, with a strain of wolf in them.

" Come on, my beauties ! " Shirley called. " Mush along there ! "

She cracked the long whip, and, as there came a commanding bark from the broad-chested Blaze, the rest of the huskies strained at the traces and the sleigh went bounding forward.

The log cabin which was Shirley's home was situated just outside Ice Creek, and to Shirley's delight her father was standing by the door as the dog-team came whirling round the bend in the trail.

She gave a cheery hail, then, as the sleigh came to a halt, she ran excitedly forward.

" Well, what do you think of them ? " she asked. " Who says girls can't handle huskies now ? "

Stanley Linton's worried face broke into a smile, and he gave her shoulder a fond squeeze.

" You've done marvellously, m'dear," he declared gruffly. " I'd never have believed you could get that speed out of a second-rate team o' dogs."

Laughingly, Shirley shook her head.

" It's Blaze who deserves all the credit, dad," she asserted. " He's a wonder ! He not only makes the other dogs obey him, but he inspires them with his own performance."

As she spoke, she stretched out a hand to fondle the half-wild dog she had recently adopted, but her father caught at her arm.

" Don't do that," he exclaimed. " He's more'n half wolf, and you know how treacherous those cross-breeds can be. I don't trust any of 'em, m'dear, and I don't really like you havin' anything to do with him."

" Oh, but that's silly, dad ! " Shirley looked a little reproachful. " Blaze is a real pet. He wouldn't hurt a baby, despite his fierce looks."

Her father, however, was unconvinced, and uneasily he gazed at the broad-chested grey husky who was now snarling at the rest of the team as if to dare any of them so much as to budge until they got the word.

" I tell you, I don't trust him, m'dear," he declared, " especially after what Nat Chipham told me."

" Nat Chipham ! " Shirley's look of indignation deepened. The man her father had mentioned was the owner of Ice Creek's one and only general store, and although he professed to be very friendly, Shirley did not like him. Why, she hardly knew, but there was something about his manner that caused her to feel vaguely mistrustful. " What does Nat Chipham know about Blaze ? " she exclaimed. "Why, he's never set eyes on him ! "

" Maybe not, m'dear, but he recognised him instantly from my description, and from what he says it's no wonder that dog was an outcast. Why, he's a killer. There's more'n one person he's attacked. Though he looks tame enough now, he's as unreliable as a wolf."

Shirley's cheeks still burnt red with indignation, but wisely she resisted the temptation to argue. She knew how bitter her father was towards all half-breed huskies. Instead, she changed the subject.

" Is there any news from Pine City ? " she asked.

Stanley Linton nodded, and his grizzled face became more glum than ever.

" Yes, m'dear. A telegram came just after you left," he replied. " 'Fraid it's no use. The bank won't advance a cent, so there seems nothing for it but to accept Nat Chipham's offer."

" You mean sell the house and land to him ? " gasped Shirley in horror. " Oh, you can't do that, dad. You promised you wouldn't. After all, if I do win the prize to-morrow, we'll have enough to carry on with for a bit." As he did not answer, she caught agitatedly at his arm. " You haven't agreed to sell, have you ? " she asked.

He shook his head.

" No—Nat's inside now, waitin' for me to make up my mind," he said slowly.

" Then go and tell him there's nothing doing," urged Shirley. " Please, dad ! You promised you'd come to no decision until after the race—you know you did."

To her relief her father smiled and gave her hand an affectionate pat.

" Very well, I'll do as you say," he said, and turning, disappeared into the log cabin.

For a moment Shirley stood there, frowning ; then, unharnessing the huskies, she put them away in the big wired-in pen which served as kennels. But Blaze remained on guard by the sleigh, and he gave a doleful bark when she made as if to pen him up also.

" You want to stay with me, don't you, my beauty ? " she said with a laugh. " Very well, then, come along—although I doubt if dad will approve."

A restraining hand on his collar, she led him across to the log cabin. As she pushed open the door she saw that her father and the proprietor of the general store—a big, burly man, with florid cheeks and shrewd, small eyes—were standing by the stove fire. Nat Chipham was shaking his head gravely.

" Just as you like, Stan," he declared. " I don't want to press you to sell if you'd rather not. As you know, I don't really want your property. I only made the offer out o' friendliness. Wait until after the race by all means, but it's only fair to warn you. I may not be able to buy the place then. I've other irons in the fire, you know."

Shirley bit her lip as she saw her father frown. She guessed what he was thinking —that if the store-keeper withdrew his offer, then he might lose the chance to sell altogether.

" It's all right, dad ! " she called. " There's no need to worry. I'm sure—— "

She broke off in startled surprise, for suddenly there had come a low snarl from the husky at her side, and he gave a jerk that nearly wrenched her fingers from his collar.

" Blaze ! " she exclaimed in reproof. " Behave yourself ! "

But for once Blaze ignored her. The fur around his collar was abristle, and he continued to snarl. A real wolf he looked now, and Nat Chipham took a nervous step backward as he saw that the dog's angry eyes were fixed on him.

" Hey, take that animal out o' here ! " he cried. " He's a killer. He's not to be trusted."

Shirley made no comment. All her attention was concentrated on trying to

control the struggling husky. But Blaze was deaf to all her entreaties. She could not understand it. Never had he acted like this before.

" Blaze !" she exclaimed sharply. " Keep still ! Don't you dare—— "

But that was as far as she got, for the big husky, giving voice to a ferocious bark, had torn himself free and launched himself across the room.

There came an alarmed shout from Mr. Linton, a yell of panic from the store-keeper, then the crash of a heavy fall. Blaze's outflung front paws had smashed against Nat Chipham's chest and had knocked the man to the floor. As he lay there, gasping and wriggling in fear, there came another savage snarl from the leader of Shirley's sleigh-team, and, fangs bared, he made a snap at his victim.

" Blaze ! "

With a cry of horror Shirley rushed forward and, grabbing Blaze by the collar, tugged with all her might.

" Blaze ! " she exclaimed again. " How dare you ! Is this how you reward me for all I've done for you ? "

At last her familiar voice seemed to reach the snarling husky, and all at once his wild struggles ceased. As he stood there, quivering, his baleful eyes still fixed on the panic-stricken store-keeper, Shirley's fingers tightly gripping his collar, Mr. Linton limped forward.

" Now you must realise that I was right, Shirley," he said. " Never trust a half-breed. They're all alike—always ready to bite the hand that feeds 'em. And that brute you adopted is the worst of the lot."

Despite what had happened, loyally Shirley sprang to the defence of her pet.

" He isn't—oh, he isn't ! " she gasped. " He's never acted like this before. Mr. Chipham must have done something to him to make him attack him like that."

The store-keeper's florid face became redder than ever as he scrambled to his feet.

" Nonsense ! " he exclaimed. " I've never clapped eyes on the brute until a moment ago. He's a killer—that's what he is—and your dad must be crazy if he lets you keep him."

Shirley's father frowned grimly.

" Don't worry, Nat," he said. " After this I wouldn't dream o' lettin' any girl o'

" Kidnap him ! What—your father ? " gasped the young trapper. Shirley laughed. " No, silly—Blaze," she said. " I hate the idea of deceiving Dad, but I've simply got to win that prize-money."

mine handle him. We'll lock him up until to-morrow and then——"

"But, dad!" In horror Shirley faced him. "The race! I'm depending on Blaze to help me win that prize."

But her father's mind was made up.

"Race or no race, that animal's not staying here," he said firmly. "First thing to-morrow I'll try an' find a new home for him, but if no one'll take him over, then I'm afraid, m'dear, he'll have to be shot!"

CHAPTER II

HOW COULD SHE WIN?

To be parted from the dog she had befriended and trained! Possibly faced with the prospect of seeing the big pet she loved led away to his death! The thought was unbearable, and hot, angry words rose to Shirley's lips, but with an effort she smothered them.

In his present frame of mind it would be futile to argue with her father. When Nat Chipham had departed and her father had calmed down, then perhaps she could win him over. Nevertheless, she could not hide her dismay, and fondly the trapper put his arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, m'dear," he said gruffly, "but you know it's only your own safety I'm thinkin' about. Whatever happens, I don't want to see you served the same as I was years ago."

Gulping back her tears, Shirley nodded.

"I—I understand, dad," she whispered.

"Good girl." He smiled his relief. "Then let Nat an' me chain up that brute before he attacks someone else."

Shirley shook her head.

"No—leave him to me," she pleaded. "I can manage him—honestly, I can. Look, he's as quiet as a lamb with me."

Releasing her grip on the husky's collar, she backed to the door, then called him. Barking his delight, Blaze ran forward, gambolling around her like a puppy. Quickly Shirley opened the door, and, giving her father no time to protest, she hurried across to the smaller pen beside the main one, for, as leader, Blaze was housed on his own.

One backward look the husky flung into the log cabin, and he snarled as he saw Nat Chipham glowering at him, but at a word from Shirley he became silent and loped obediently across to the pen. As she opened the door, Shirley gazed at him glumly.

"It'll be awful if we've got to part," she whispered. "Oh, what made you act like that, Blaze? You're not really savage. I know you're not. Is it that you're like me? Don't you like Nat Chipham?"

The husky gazed up at her as if he understood, and he gave a low growl, as if by way of assent.

"Have you seen him before?" Shirley went on. "Has he ill-treated you? Is that why you went for him?"

Again Blaze growled, and Shirley was satisfied. Though she only had her instincts to go on she was certain that the burly store-keeper had lied. The team leader's attack had not been unprovoked. There was more behind Blaze's startling outburst than appeared on the surface.

"If only I could find out what it is," she murmured, as she shut up Blaze and carefully let slip the wooden latch. "Then, perhaps, dad would change his mind."

With a thoughtful sigh she returned to the log cabin to prepare dinner. Her thoughts were on the race. Now that the bank had refused to help, it was vital that she should win the prize money. If she didn't, then they would be forced to accept Nat Chipham's offer to buy the property.

"But I'd hate to see him have it!" she told herself, as she put the potatoes on to boil. "I never did like him, and after what happened just now I dislike him more than ever. Oh, I simply must let dad include Blaze in my team to-morrow."

But when she broached the subject over dinner Stanley Linton shook his head regretfully.

"I'm sorry, m'dear, but he must go," he said. "I daren't let you take any more chances."

And all her arguments failed to move him. Miserably she cleared away and washed up, then put on her warm mack-

inaw coat and went out into the icy cold to give her sleigh-team another practice run. Blaze barked with delight as he watched her harness the other huskies to the sleigh, but his barks changed to doleful, puzzled whines when he saw her harness as leader, not himself, but a spare dog. Wildly he scrabbled at the door of his pen. It made Shirley's heart ache to see him, but firmly she shook her head.

" I'm sorry, Blaze," she gulped, "but I'm afraid you can't come with us."

And, hating to hear his now frantic howls, she cracked her whip and sent the team bounding forward on to the snowy trail that led from Ice Creek to the nearby mountains. Usually she revelled in these practice runs. She enjoyed nothing better than to be mushing along behind the excitedly yapping husky team, but this afternoon she had no heart for it. Only the knowledge of what was at stake—only the realisation that whatever happened she must win to-morrow's race—kept her on the trail.

" Mush along there ! " she called. "Keep in line—behave yourselves ! "

But the dogs, with no Blaze to keep them under control, jostled each other, and, though she shouted to the big brown husky she had made leader, he made little effort to set the rest of the team a good example.

When she reached the end of the five-mile run, already marked out with gaily coloured flags in readiness for to-morrow's big race, she pulled the panting dogs to a halt, and anxiously consulted her wrist watch.

" Oh, gee ! " she exclaimed in dismay. " We've taken over five minutes longer than this morning. This'll never do."

Frowning, she turned the sleigh, then forced herself to cheer up. Perhaps the team would do better on the homeward run. After all, she mustn't be too critical of White Streak, the new leader. He had hardly had time to get accustomed to his new responsibilities yet. But though the dogs set off at a spanking pace on the downward homeward run, their spurt was short-lived.

Desperately Shirley cracked her whip.

" Get a move on there ! " she ordered. " White Streak—show them the way ! "

But the leader paid no heed, and, although Shirley exerted all her powers of persuasion, all her skill, it was of little avail, and by the time they reached home she knew that it would be foolish to expect to win without Blaze. His presence in the team made all the difference.

" But dad'll never agree," she told herself glumly. " He's a dear, but as obstinate as a bear. I only wish——"

Breaking off, she crossed to Blaze's pen, and that dog reared excitedly up on his hind-legs and licked her hand as she thrust it over the top of the wire fence. Fondly she looked down at him.

" And they call you a killer ! " she exclaimed indignantly. " Why, it's absurd. I've a jolly good mind to——" She broke off, a daring thought occurring to her, as careering towards Ice Creek she saw a dog-driven sleigh, a lithe young man running behind.

" Bob Young ! " she exclaimed. " He might help me. Anyway, it's worth trying."

And, dashing out on to the snow-covered road, she gave the young trapper a hail. He grinned cheerily as he saw her and instantly brought his team to a halt.

" Hello, Shirley ! " he exclaimed. " How is it you aren't out practising ? We are all bankin' on you winnin' to-morrow, you know. If you don't, then Samuel Purvis'll win for sure—and that would be just too bad."

His bronzed face twisted into a scowl, and Shirley smiled. Samuel Purvis was a trapper who had the reputation of being a bully and a braggart. She disliked him as much as Bob did.

" I'll certainly do my best," she said, " but—well, it really depends on you, Bob."

" On me ? " He gazed at her incredulously. " How come ? " he demanded.

Shirley drew in a deep breath. The crucial moment had come to put her audacious plan into action. Would this friendly young trapper help her ?

" Well, it's like this," she said, and related all that had happened.

Bob Young gave a dismayed shout.

" You mean that without Blaze as leader you stand no chance ? " he gasped.

Shirley shook her head.

" Not a hope," she declared. " Samuel Purvis will win easily."

" Gee, I'd hate to see that happen ! " he asserted. " That big bully sure gives me a pain in the neck ! Can't anything be done about this dog o' yourn, Shirley ? I've seen him, and I'll stake my life he's harmless enough."

" He is—a real pet," Shirley declared, " but the trouble is dad doesn't think so. That's why I want you to kidnap him."

" Kidnap him ! What—your father ? " the young trapper gasped.

Shirley laughed.

" No, silly—Blaze ! Don't you see, it's the only way. I hate the idea of deceiving dad, but I've simply got to win that prize money. Listen, Bob, this is what I want you to do."

Excitedly she explained, and to her delight the young trapper slapped his thigh and chuckled.

" I get it ! " he grinned. " You want me to snaffle Blaze an' keep him hidden until to-morrow. Your dad'll think he's broken loose an' done a bunk, and he won't be any the wiser until he sees you at the starting line."

Shirley nodded.

" And then it'll be too late," she said. " Of course, the poor old dear will be furious, but if I win—well, then he will realise what an injustice he's done Blaze." She clutched anxiously at his arm. " Will you do it ? " she asked.

Without hesitation he nodded.

" Sure I will, honey," he replied. " Not only for your sake, but also to beat Samuel Purvis. He's a crony o' Nat Chipham, and I hate both of 'em. Okay. I'll be along just after dark, and don't worry. I'll keep Blaze well hidden until just before the race, then——"

He broke off, for, unnoticed, a burly figure had come striding up the trail. It was Nat Chipham, and Shirley's heart missed a beat as she turned and saw him. How much had he overheard ? If he had learnt of her secret pact with Bob, then he would be certain to warn her father what was afoot.

Ignoring the young trapper completely, he grinned across at Shirley.

" If you're on your way home I'll walk with you," he said.

Shirley hesitated, then nodded.

" Very well," she replied, and, with a cheery smile at the young trapper, she accompanied him up the trail. " Have you come to see dad ? " she asked.

" Yep—I thought maybe he'd change his mind," he grinned. " It seems silly to lose everything. Guess he's got to lose the property, anyway, so he'd be wise to sell out to me. That way he'd make certain of havin' enough money to make a fresh start."

Shirley's lips compressed.

" Don't be so sure that we will lose our home," she snapped. " If I win the race to-morrow——"

" If ! " He laughed, then placed a podgy hand on Shirley's arm. " Sorry, m'dear, if I sound incredulous, but you know as well as I do that you don't stand a chance. Now that your dad's forbidden you to use Blaze you're beaten afore you start. Now why don't you be sensible, and agree to your father withdrawin' that tom-fool promise he made you ? You wouldn't get such a good offer from anyone else, you know."

Shirley eyed him in sudden suspicion.

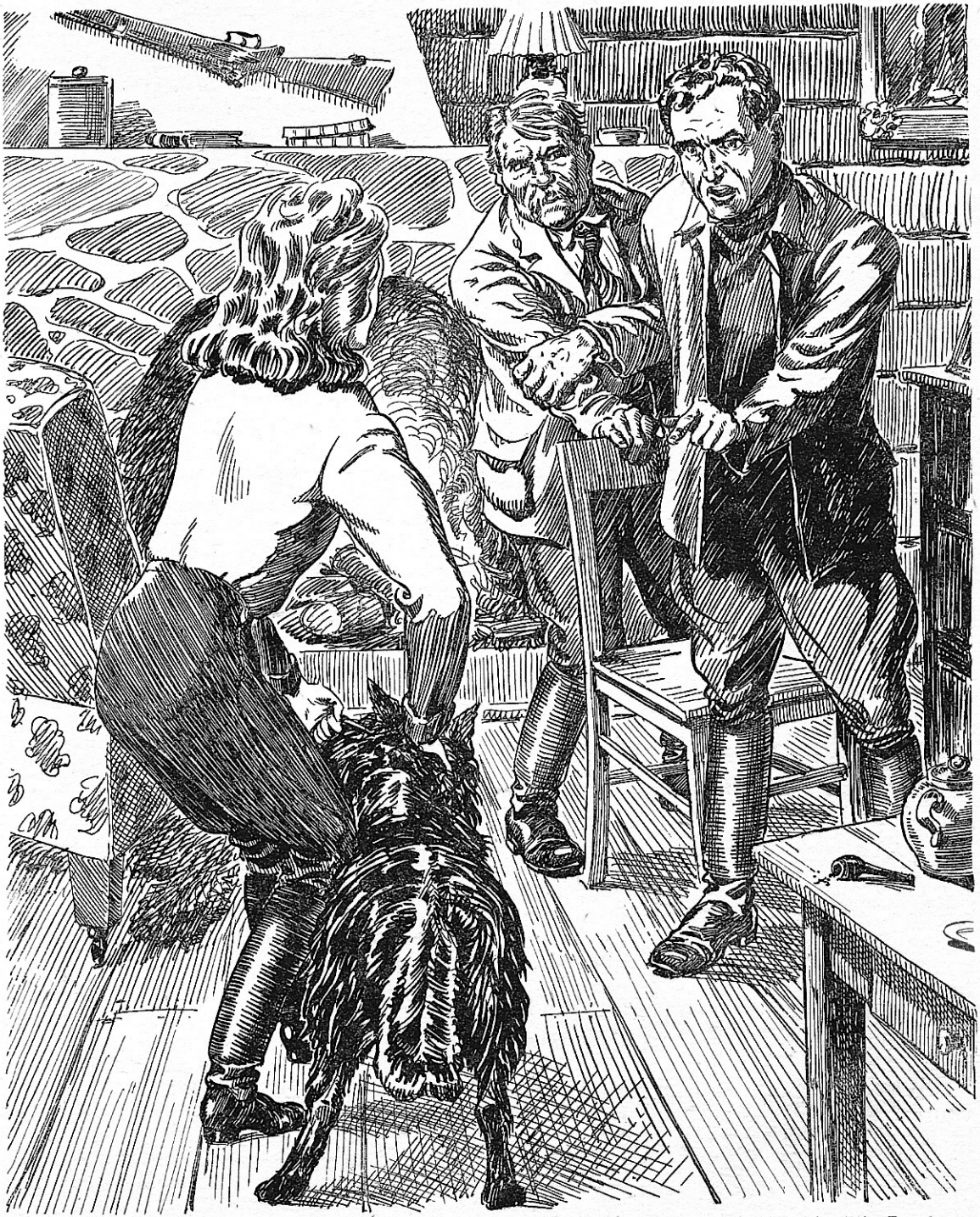
" You seem very anxious to get hold of our land," she said sharply. " What's the big idea ? Why are you so eager for dad to sell ? "

He laughed, but his small eyes flickered uneasily.

" You've got the wrong idea, kid," he protested. " I don't really want your land. I've got plenty o' my own. I just want to help your dad, that's all. Now be sensible and persuade him to accept my offer."

Again his hand fell on her shoulder, but with a toss of her head Shirley stepped aside, hating the touch of his podgy fingers.

" I am being sensible," she snapped. " That's why I'm holding dad to his promise. You may fool him, Mr. Nat Chipham, but you don't fool me. You're



"But, Dad!" cried Shirley. "The race! I'm depending on Blaze to help me win the prize!" But her father's mind was made up. "Race or no race," he said firmly, "that animal's not staying here."

up to some game—and I'm not the only one who's wise to you ! "

His smarmy smile vanished and he scowled.

" What d'you mean ? " he blustered.

" I mean that Blaze is a good judge of character. That's why he attacked you," she retorted, and quickened her step. " It's no good you coming any farther," she flung over her shoulder. " Dad's not in. In any case, he won't sell to you until he knows the result of the race."

He made no attempt to follow her, but stood there, glaring, and Shirley hurried into the log cabin. Once inside, she stared thoughtfully through the window across at the wired-in pen where Blaze, a picture of abject misery, squatted.

" I don't know what Nat Chipham's game is," she murmured, " but whatever it is, it isn't coming off. I'm going to win to-morrow. What's more, it's Blaze who's going to lead my team."

As her suspicions deepened against Nat Chipham she was more and more pleased that she had secured Bob Young's help, and, as the Arctic twilight swiftly changed to darkness, she waited anxiously for the young trapper to arrive to carry out his promise.

Her father, seated by the stove fire, studying the mortgage agreement, as if hoping against hope to find some way out of his money troubles, looked across at her curiously.

" What's the matter, m' dear ? " he asked. " You seem very fidgety."

" Oh, it's nothing," she said, trying to speak nonchalantly. " It's only——"

She broke off and involuntarily she stiffened. From outside had come a loud bark. Blaze ! Had Bob come to smuggle him away ? The bark was followed by several more, and Mr. Linton frowned uneasily.

" What's wrong with that dog o' yourn ? " he demanded. " Maybe I'd better go an' see what's the trouble."

As the barks changed to a low, ferocious snarl he rose to his feet and reached for his stick. Desperately Shirley ran forward.

" No, it's all right ! " she gasped. " It's only that something's roused him. He will quieten down in a minute. There's no need for you to——"

Again she broke off, for suddenly an even more alarming sound had rung out. The sound of angry shouts, followed by the whip-like crack of a gun.

" Gosh, but what is happenin' out there ? " cried Mr. Linton, and limped across to the door.

This time Shirley made no attempt to detain him. She herself was alarmed now.

Out into the icy blackness she and her father rushed. There came no more barks, but from the direction of the kennels came another rifle-shot, and standing there, gun to his shoulder, Shirley saw a burly figure.

" Nat Chipham ! " she gasped in amazement. " What on earth are you doing ? "

He turned and grinned.

" Shootin' at that wolf you call a dog ! " he growled. " I don't think I managed to hit the brute—worse luck—but he's cleared off, and I guess he won't dare show up in these parts again."

Shirley's eyes filled with horror.

" Shooting at Blaze ! " she panted. " But why ? How dare you——"

Her voice trailed away, and she stared blankly as suddenly she discerned a limp, unconscious figure lying in the snow near Blaze's open pen. Running forward, she dropped to one knee beside it, then a startled gasp escaped her lips.

" It's—it's Bob Young ! " she gulped.

" Bob Young ? " echoed her father, limping forward. " But what's he doing here ? "

The burly store-keeper shook his head.

" Dunno, but when I came along he was lyin' there, and that darned wolf was standing over him. Guess if I hadn't started shootin' he'd have torn that young fool to bits."

Her face white and bewildered, Shirley looked up.

" Blaze—attacked Bob ! " she gasped " I don't believe it ! "

" Then just look for yourself," the store-keeper growled. " You'll see that his coat's almost torn off his back."

Incredulously Shirley gazed at that still figure, then she drew in a shocked breath

as she saw that the young trapper's clothing did look as if savage fangs had ripped them to shreds.

" Oh, goodness, surely I haven't been mistaken in Blaze ! " she murmured in horror. " Surely he didn't go for Bob when he came to let him out ! "

The thought was anguish to her, and it was dazedly that she watched Chipham and her father lift the young man up and carry him into the log cabin. Only when they had undressed him and made him comfortable in the bunk in the spare room did she rouse herself, and, going inside, put on the kettle.

" Is he badly hurt ? " she whispered, as her father emerged from the bed-room.

He shook his head.

" No—fortunately Nat arrived on the scene just in time to drive off that savage brute," he declared. " Bob's comin' round and I guess a cup o' strong tea will do him good."

Eagerly Shirley made the tea and poured it out. But all the time her head was whirling round and round. Surely there must be some mistake. She couldn't —just couldn't—believe that Blaze was a killer. And yet, how else was the alarming incident to be explained ? Taking the tea into the bed-room, she gazed anxiously down at the young trapper.

" Are you feeling any better ? " she breathed.

To her delight he smiled, and sitting up unaided, gratefully took the cup of tea from her.

" Sure. Don't you worry, Shirley," he said. " I'll be okay after a good sleep."

" But what—what happened ? " she asked.

He shook his head.

" Bothered if I know. I came along as I promised, and as I stepped into the yard I heard Blaze howling and snarling as if he'd gone crazy. I couldn't see him, though, and when I walked up towards his pen—something struck me in the small o' my back and over I went. Guess that's all I know," he ended ruefully. " I banged my head against the doorpost and lost my senses. Next thing I knew I was lying in bunk here."

Though his voice was cheery, it was obvious that he still felt weak and dizzy, and so, when he had drunk his tea, Shirley left him. Despite what he had said she was still vaguely dissatisfied. She could not believe Blaze would attack anyone he had always liked. There must be some other explanation. Yet what could it be?

As she returned to the living-room she heard her father bidding Nat Chipham good-night.

" You're right, Nat," he was saying. " That brute won't dare show up again. He's returned to the wilds where he belongs."

Shirley's heart contracted with grief. She would never see her pet again ! And then her face paled as the store-keeper spoke.

" See you at the races," he declared as he made to stride off. " And I'll have the papers all ready for your signature. It's wise you are to accept my offer."

Shirley stood as if turned to stone. Then her father had decided to sell the property immediately after the conclusion of the Five Mile Race ! Unless her sleigh-team won, the crafty store-keeper would secure her home ! But how could she win now that she had lost Blaze, the wonder leader she herself had trained ?

CHAPTER III

BLAZE DOES HIS BEST

" I'm afraid you beauties aren't much good without Blaze, but somehow I've got to make you win."

It was the following morning, and Shirley, having given her father and Bob Young, now little the worse for his unpleasant experience, their breakfast, had donned her warm outdoor clothes and made her way to the huskies' pen. The Five Mile Race did not start until twelve o'clock, and in a desperate attempt to make the most of her dog-team she intended to take them out on a short practice run.

As she crossed to release them, she looked into the adjoining pen. It was empty. There was no sign of Blaze. Her father was right. He had returned to the wilds from which she had rescued him. She would never see him again.

The tears rose to her eyes, and then, abruptly, she tensed. What was that lying there in the snow?

"Why, it looks like someone's wallet!" she exclaimed. "But whoever can it belong to? Bob and Nat Chipham both said they never entered Blaze's pen last night."

Stepping into the wired-in enclosure, she picked up the leather wallet, and her wonderment deepened as she saw the monogram stamped in gold on it.

"S.P.," she murmured. "Surely this can't belong to Samuel Purvis!" She frowned, and, as she remembered that her biggest rival in the forthcoming race was a crony of Nat Chipham, remembered also her dislike and mistrust of them both, she opened the wallet and peered inside. One pocket held a sheaf of five-dollar notes. The opposite one was empty save for a folded scrap of paper. She pulled it out, then her eyes widened as she saw the signature and to whom it was addressed.

"It's from Nat Chipham!" she gasped. "And it does belong to that bully Purvis. But what was he doing in Blaze's pen?"

Her suspicions fully roused now, she smoothed out the letter and read it without compunction. It was an amazing letter, and as she scanned those closely written lines she cried out in indignation and astonishment.

"Blaze didn't attack Bob!" she exclaimed. "And he didn't run away! He was kidnapped! It was all a cunning plot on the part of Samuel Purvis and Nat Chipham!"

The letter did not reveal everything, but it told enough of the truth to enable her to guess the rest, and Shirley's blood boiled as she realised how the big-hearted husky had been made the victim of a wicked conspiracy.

It seemed that as a pup Blaze had belonged to Nat Chipham. In an effort to master the dog's high spirits the store-keeper had ill-treated it, and when these cruel methods had failed, had callously turned the young dog adrift. That was why Blaze had attacked the man. The dog had recognised him instantly, and had remembered all that he had suffered at Chipham's hands.

Chipham had also recognised the husky, and, fearing lest Blaze should enable Shirley to win the Five Mile Race and thus frustrate his plans to gain possession of the Linton land and homestead, he had concocted the false story that the husky was a killer.

It appeared that the rascally store-keeper had overheard much of Shirley's conversation with Bob Young, and, determined at all costs to prevent her winning, he had arranged with Samuel Purvis and another man to kidnap the dog. The barks and howls Shirley had heard had been caused by the husky's frantic efforts to escape from the bullying trapper.

Bob Young, attracted by the noise, had been attacked from behind by Nat Chipham, and as Bob lay there unconscious, the crafty store-keeper had slashed his clothes with a knife, and had then fired his gun—to give colour to his lying story that Blaze, having mauled the young trapper, had fled.

"Oh, the villain!" gasped Shirley, as slowly she pieced all the pieces of the treacherous plot together. "I knew all along that he wasn't really dad's friend—that he had some ulterior motive for wanting to buy our land."

But why should the store-keeper be so desperately anxious to gain possession of the property? The letter gave not the slightest clue, and Shirley wasted no time in trying to solve the mystery. Her duty was clear. She must discover what had become of her pet—must find and rescue Blaze before twelve o'clock, when the all-important race was to commence.

Letter in hand, she took a step towards the log cabin, and then she paused, shaking her head. Her father was a cripple, and Bob Young was still weak from the brutal attack which had been made on him. If she told them what had happened, precious time would be wasted, for they would insist that the sheriff should be informed.

"But it'll take ages to get the authorities into action," she told herself. "And I

While Shirley untied one of the ropes, her intelligent husky tackled the other with his teeth. Could they destroy the bridge before their villainous pursuer arrived on the scene ?

daren't wait. Now it's more essential than ever that I should win the race. At all costs Nat Chipham mustn't get hold of our land."

Thrusting the letter into her pocket, she strode out of the pen and searched around in the snow. After a minute or two she found what she sought—the marks of steel runners. Blaze had obviously been taken away in a sleigh. It ought to be easy to follow that well-defined double imprint in the snow.

Harnessing up her dog-team, she grasped the gee-pole and cracked her whip.

" Mush along ! " she called. " Come on —get a move on ! "

Led by White Streak, the huskies bounded forward and, her eyes agleam with fierce determination, Shirley guided the sleigh through the deep snow, her gaze riveted on the tracks left by the kidnappers.

Away from Ice Creek the trail led—up towards the snow-clad mountains. For two hours Shirley followed it, and then, on a stretch of ice-hard ground, she lost it. Pulling in the panting huskies, she looked anxiously around. Which way had the kidnappers taken ? Right before her was a short but steep slope. Tethering the dog-team to the stump of a dead pine, she toiled through the snow on foot. On gaining the top of the slope she saw before her a deep ravine, spanned by a long plank fastened into place by ropes. And on the snowy plank was the impress of footprints ! Samuel Purvis and his hireling had crossed the ravine !

Nervously she edged her way along the narrow plank, and her heart gave a leap as in the distance she saw a tumbledown shack. Pausing, she surveyed it speculatively, and then her heart gave another wild leap, for faintly but unmistakably from the outhouse at the side of the shack there arose a piteous whining.

" Blaze ! " she exclaimed.

Instantly, without any thought of possible danger, she ran forward. From the shack's stove pipe arose a spiral of smoke, indicating that the place was inhabited. Shirley approached more cautiously. On tenter-hooks of anxiety she gained the outhouse and pushed open the door.

" Blaze," she called softly.

From the murky gloom before her came whines and the sounds of frantic scuffling, and then she saw him. Blaze was tethered to a staple in the wall by means of a rope, and his sleek head was cruelly muzzled.

" Blaze ! " she gasped again. " Oh, you poor dear ! How dare anyone treat you so cruelly ! But just a moment, beauty. I'll soon have you free."

Unfastening the rope, she dropped to one knee before the whining, quivering dog, and with furious hands tore off the muzzle. Blaze gave a thunderous bark of welcome, and his yellowish-green eyes glowed with affection.

" S'sh ! You must keep quiet, lovely," Shirley warned him. " If anyone should hear——"

Breaking off, she darted to the door, and eagerly the big husky followed her. But as they emerged from the outhouse a burly figure in furs loomed into view. Samuel Purvis's hireling, and as he saw the girl and dog a bellow left his lips.

" So that's the game, is it ? " he snarled. " Well, you ain't goin' to escape so easily."

Running forward, his hand flew to his coat pocket. Shirley gave a horrified gasp, for she guessed he was reaching for a gun.

" Quick, Blaze—run for it ! " she panted.

But the well-trained husky did not obey. Fangs bared, ears down, he hurled himself through the air. Just as the man whipped out his gun, Blaze's fore-paws struck him in the chest. With a howl, he tottered and fell, Blaze on top of him.

" Oh, well done ! " Shirley shouted her praise, then, her one thought to get back to Ice Creek in time for the race, she called to her pet. " Never mind him, beauty—come on," she ordered.

Reluctantly Blaze turned and left the howling man, and together he and Shirley hurried back over the ravine. When she reached the far side of the plank, Shirley bent and tugged frantically at one of the ropes which held it in place. She didn't intend there to be any pursuit. Blaze watched her puzzledly for a moment, then with a bark of understanding he sprang forward and buried his sharp fangs in the other rope.

From the other side came a furious shout, then the crack of a six-gun. The kidnapper, having recovered, was lumbering furiously towards the ravine.

" Quick, Blaze ! " Shirley gasped as a bullet went whirling overhead.

The dog gave a loud bark and tussled savagely with the ropes. Suddenly they snapped, and down into the ravine the long plank crashed. Further pursuit was impossible now. Panting with relief, Shirley plunged down the steep slope to where she had left her dog-team. On this lower level she was out of sight and range of the man on the other side of the ravine, and with feverish haste she unharnessed White Streak.

" You'll have to run along behind," she told him. " Blaze's the leader from now on. I only hope——" Pausing, she looked at her wrist-watch, then gasped. " Oh, gee, we've only got just over half an hour ! Come on, Blaze, we'll have to get a move on."

And her heart contracted with fear as she strapped the big husky into place. Would they be able to get back to Ice Creek in time for the race ?

. . . . . .

" It's a deal, then ! The moment the race is over you'll sign the deeds that'll make the property over to me."

The speaker was Nat Chipham, and with hearty cheerfulness he slapped Mr. Linton across the shoulders.

" I don't really want your land, you know," he lied. " I'm just buying it to do you a good turn."

The crippled trapper made no comment. He was looking anxiously up the road to where stood half a dozen restive dog-teams with their attendant owners.

In a very few minutes the race was timed to start, and there was still no sign

of Shirley. Worriedly Mr. Linton turned to Bob Young, who had accompanied him to Ice Creek.

" What can have become of her ? " he asked.

The young trapper shook his head. He was also looking uneasy and bewildered.

" I just can't imagine," he replied. ' She said she was going to take her team for a short practice run, but she sure ought to have shown up by now. Oh, gee, there goes the bell ! "

As the big brass bell outside the judges' shack clanged out, whips cracked, and the competitors roused their squatting teams and manœuvred them into position.

Nat Chipham, strolling forward, grinned at Samuel Purvis.

" Guess it's okay, Sam," he said. " You'll win easily, and soon as the race is over, that fool Linton's agreed to sell."

The burly trapper grinned back, then drove his sleigh into line. The official starter, six-gun in hand, looked up and down the long line of dogs.

" All present an' correct ? " he asked, then frowned. " Say, where's Shirley Linton ? " he asked.

Purvis gave a hoarse chuckle.

" Aw, I guess she's got cold feet," he declared. " Anyway, it's past time. Let's get movin'."

The starter nodded and raised his gun, but at that moment from the distance there came a frantic shout :

" Stop ! Stop ! Oh, please wait for me ! "

Round swung Mr. Linton and Bob Young, then incredulously they stared as down the snowy street they saw careering a dog-team, with a slender girl clinging to the gee-pole.

" Gosh, but it's Shirley ! " exclaimed the crippled trapper.

" And that's Blaze who's leadin' the team ! " shouted Bob Young. " Hey, just a minute, starter ! Hang on until——"

But too late !

The starter had already fired his gun, and to the accompaniment of cracking whips, frantic shouts and excited yappings the rival dog-teams went bounding forward.

Shirley, still thirty yards from the starting line, gave a gasp of dismay, then desperately she called to the big grey leader of her team.

" Mush, Blaze—mush ! " she shouted. " We've got to overtake them ! We've got to win ! "

The great-hearted husky lifted his head and gave a thunderous bark. It was a word of command to the rest of the team, and instantly they responded. Vigorously they strained on the traces, and as Blaze barked again, urgently, commandingly, they broke into a furious gallop.

On past the starting line the sleigh hurtled ; on past the staring spectators ; on after the rest of the competitors.

Mr. Linton and Bob Young stared until all the dog-teams had disappeared over the brow of the snow-covered hill, then anxiously they turned and regarded each other.

Could Shirley possibly make up for her bad start ?

It was not for a long time that that question was answered, then, after a suspense which was rapidly becoming unbearable, there came a shout from the watchers on the hill-top.

" Here comes the first—back on the homeward run ! "

Hardly daring to breathe, so great was their anxiety, the crippled trapper and Bob watched and waited. Over the crest of the slope appeared a double line of panting huskies, hauling a bounding sleigh. Bob's face fell as he recognised the driver.

" It's Sam Purvis ! " he exclaimed. " Oh, gee, then Shirley hasn't managed to—— Yes, by gosh ! Here she comes ! And she's only a bare two lengths behind. Come on, Shirley ! Come on, Blaze ! "

Whipping off his fur hat, he waved it frenziedly. Mr. Linton did the same, while from the other spectators came cheers and counter-cheers.

On towards the winning post pounded the two dog-teams. Samuel Purvis was still in front, but Shirley was gaining. Inch by inch she was making up the leeway, and from Blaze came thunderous bark after thunderous bark. The big husky was goading on the rest of the team—entreating them, warning them. If they

didn't get a move on they'd have him to deal with.

" Shirley ! Shirley ! " shouted Bob, jumping up and down with excitement. " Gee, I guess you can do it ! Attagirl ! Come on, there ! Come on, Blaze ! "

Shirley and Blaze's names were on everyone's lips now, for the two sleighs were level.

Bob Young was dancing with excitement, but suddenly he gave a startled yell and his face went red with anger.

" Look out there ! Gee, of all the treacherous coyotes ! " he gasped, for Samuel Purvis, realising that he was being left behind, had raised his long raw-hide whip. " Look out ! " the young trapper shouted again.

But Shirley, warned by the look of utter fury on Purvis's face, had been half-expecting such a villainous move, and quickly she ducked. The swirling whip-lash threshed harmlessly over her, and before her furious rival could strike again there had come another commanding bark from Blaze and Shirley's dog-team had gone plunging into the lead.

And once having gained the lead, Shirley did not mean to lose it again.

One last mad spurt, and then there came a burst of cheers and shouts from the watching crowd.

" She's done it ! " whooped Bob Young. " She's beaten that hoodlum by a bare nose ! "

And won Shirley had—thanks to that amazing last-minute sprint inspired by Blaze.

As soon as the excitement was over, Shirley, of course, related all that had happened, and grimly her father and Bob Young searched around for Nat Chipham and his rascally crony, but there was no sign of either of them. Knowing the game was up, they had made themselves scarce.

" But I still can't understand it," Mr. Linton declared. " Why should they be so anxious to get hold o' my property ? "

That question was answered two days later when a letter arrived from Pine City, intimating that gold had been located on Stanley Linton's land.

" So that's it ! " exclaimed Shirley. " Those rascals must have got wise to the truth, and tried to take advantage of our troubles to get the gold for themselves. Thank goodness their plot didn't succeed."

" It's thanks to you, m'dear, that it didn't," said her father.

But laughingly Shirley shook her head.

" No—it's thanks to Blaze," she declared. " He deserves all the credit."

And fondly she gazed across the log cabin to where the big husky was luxuriously stretched before the stove fire, one bent paw protecting his nose.

The Smuggler's Daughter

A romantic story of those lawless days when bands of wreckers haunted the Cornish coast.

By
RENE FRAZER

CHAPTER I

HER FATHER UNDER SUSPICION

THERE had not been a gale to match it for years—certainly not within Jean's memory; and she had lived most of her life on that wild part of the Cornish coast, where shipwrecks were all too common in those bold, lawless days of the last century.

The howl of the wind and the distant boom of the waves penetrated even the cosy fastness of Monks Lynn Hall, vying with the lively strains of a polka and the merry laughter of the youthful guests.

For the most part it was ignored by the gay throng. They had no cause to worry. The night was young, as yet—and they had carriages to take them home.

More than one curious glance was turned towards the slender, pensive girl seated alone in the window alcove, her attractive face pale against the raven darkness of her hair. Somehow she seemed out of place in that merry crowd—more in tune with the storm than with the music and laughter.

And Jean Varden was aware of the nudges and covert glances; she had become almost used to them by now.

She tried to appear oblivious to the raised eyebrows—the hurried whispers:

"Don't you know? That's Jean Varden

—the smuggler's daughter! Her father's wanted by the Preventive Men . . . such a pity. . . ."

With sudden decision Jean rose to her feet, forcing a quick smile as a young man in naval uniform bore down on her—Jack Lorimer, midshipman, brother of her greatest chum, Anne Lorimer.

Jack was fair, rugged and not bad-looking. He and Anne had always been Jean's staunch pals—and she needed their friendship now, more than ever.

"May I have the pleasure?" he asked, with his grave, pleasant smile.

Jean shook her head, as she rested a hand on his arm. She looked very appealing in her dainty blue silk gown—her father's last present—with its tiny puff sleeves and deep lace collar.

"I—I don't feel like dancing to-night, Jack"—her voice faltered slightly. "I'd rather just sit and watch the storm. You—you do understand?"

Jack nodded with a sympathetic glance.

"Yes—but look here, Jean, I'm certain you're making too much of this! I mean, it's quite possible your dad was called away on urgent business, without having time to leave a message. The next post-chaise might bring a letter for you. You must try to cheer up."

"I—I am trying"—Jean swallowed—"and you're awfully nice to me, Jack. But you know what they're all saying?"

"Maybe." Jack frowned. "It's a lot of rot, anyway. Anne and I don't believe a word of it. Just because your dad gave shelter to Jeff Pegellis when the old chap was wounded. Forget it, Jean—and let's dance! You know, this is my last evening ashore; we sail to-night with the high tide."

"Oh!"

Jean's dark eyes widened—was it from fear? The gale outside shook the tall windows, and the distant boom of the surf sounded like muffled thunder.

"I didn't know it was so soon. What about the storm?"

Jack laughed.

"His Majesty's frigate can't be delayed for a trifle like that; we're escorting a merchantman with rich cargo—but that's a state secret!" He winked, raising a finger to his lips, as he led Jean towards the ballroom floor. "Come—you can't refuse me a last favour!"

Jean gave in; a waltz was in progress—there was gaiety in the air—and Jean loved a good time as much as other girls. Besides, Jack's sane logic had carried weight. Her father had always been a rover; to go off at a minute's notice, while his daughter was staying with friends, was merely characteristic.

As for his association with smugglers—well, smuggling was not such a crime in those boisterous, hard-living days; many Cornish folk were mixed up in the traffic, and it was considered good sport to hoodwink the too inquisitive Excise men.

Her father was a generous, impulsive man, and he saw no harm in giving a wounded smuggler a bed and shelter for a few nights.

True, there had been darker, more sinister rumours—rumours that Jean scarcely understood, and to which she turned a deaf ear.

She had implicit faith in the keen-eyed, daring sailor who had brought her up through her motherless childhood. She adored her father, and would hear no ill word spoken of him.

She knew he would have wished her to enjoy herself to-night—and, smiling, she allowed Jack to lead her into the dance.

Many eyes followed their progress round the room, for they made a pleasing couple—Jean with her raven curls, the young midshipman with his upright bearing and smart uniform.

The leader of the Romany orchestra—a sun-tanned young fellow, with a mop of dark, curly hair and dare-devil features, singled the couple out for his most flashing smile.

Raising his violin bow in a gay salute, he switched over to a livelier tune, quickening the tempo till Jean was breathless and laughing, all her cares momentarily forgotten.

But other glances were not so friendly; some were envious and spiteful. Among the latter were the covert looks of two girls seated on the dais at the far end of

the room, where wealthy Squire Penhale entertained a select few of his more favoured guests.

Sylvia Penhale, the squire's languidly pretty niece, nudged her companion, daughter of the local bailiff.

" Shucks, Bella—the smuggler's daughter is giving herself airs to-night ! Jack Lorimer's smart uniform must have gone to her head ! "

Bella Hawkesby darted a swift glance at the couple from her dark, cunning eyes. Her thin lips were twisted in an unpleasant smile.

" The stupid chit may flaunt herself in her new gown," she muttered. " We'll soon see what her airs and graces are worth ! Mark me, Sylvia—I know what I know ! "

They spoke in undertones, their heads close together, as the youthful couple approached the dais. Anne Lorimer, seated at an adjacent table, caught sight of her brother and waved. Jack grinned and waved back.

" I promised Anne the next dance," he said apologetically.

" High time, too ! " rejoined Jean with mock severity. " You're neglecting your sister shamefully, young man ! "

She was feeling almost lighthearted, her troubles temporarily erased ; not a shadow of impending disaster marred her enjoyment.

Squire Penhale, bluff and handsome in his rich attire, quizzed at them through his glass.

" Hallo, there, Lorimer ! So you really sail to-night ? "

" To-night at high tide, sir," rejoined Jack, halting by the dais.

" Bon voyage, young man ! " said the squire. " Give my best regards to Captain Devereux."

Silas Hawkesby, the bailiff, rubbed his thin hands.

" A safe voyage to you, young sir," he purred. " Your captain should keep his eyes open for the Thatcher Light. The rocks are cruel dangerous—and they say that the Wreckers are abroad."

" The Wreckers ? "

A low, horrified murmur went up from the guests nearest the dais ; Jean's face paled and she felt a cold hand tighten at her heart.

The Wreckers !

The dread word was rarely spoken except in a whisper. The name concealed the identities of the mysterious, ruthless band of pirates, masquerading as smugglers, who lured unfortunate ships to their doom on the cruel rocks, in order to pilfer their rich cargo.

The leader of the band was known to be a man of brains and daring—a man who knew neither fear nor scruples.

For some reason Jean's heart felt like ice, as her hand tightened on her partner's arm.

The midshipman laughed.

" Trust Captain Devereux to see to that, sir," he replied. " He's up to the scoundrels' tricks ! "

" I trust so," remarked the squire gravely. " I wish we could run them to earth. Didn't you tell me, Silas, that the coastguards had found a clue ? "

Jean held her breath, edging nearer to the dais. She could not have said why she was so tensely interested—why she waited with a thumping heart for the bailiff's reply.

Sylvia Penhale and Bella Hawkesby were eyeing her strangely.

Silas rubbed his talon-like hands.

" A clue ? Yes—a slender one, sir. It has been established that the leader of the dastardly band is a seafarer well known in these parts ; it is thought that his chief assistant is a reckless youth wanted for robbery. There may be a girl in the plot, but that is not certain."

" A girl ? " came the horrified gasp.

" Tut, tut ! Unbelievable ! " declared the squire.

" That may be as it may be," murmured Silas, as he produced a scrap of shimmering silk from an inner pocket. " This was found by the coastguards. It may be a scrap of the booty—or it may have been torn from a young woman's attire."

The fury of the gale increased, rattling the tall windows ; Bella Hawkesby laughed unpleasantly as she reached for the scrap of silk.

Jean was staring at it like a girl in a dream. It was just a coincidence, of course; she was letting her fancies play tricks to-night. Perhaps it was the gale.

"What a night for the Wreckers!" muttered Silas.

"Come, come!" intervened the squire. "Enough of this talk. Let us not spoil the merrymaking! Jack Lorimer, my boy—here's to you, and a safe voyage!"

He filled a long glass from the punch-bowl, handing it to Jack.

The young midshipman raised it aloft. "Here's to the prettiest girl in the room!" he remarked, with his grave smile; and he looked across at his partner.

Jean started, blushing self-consciously as she encountered Sylvia Penhale's withering glance. Anne was clapping and laughing as she looked roguishly at her chum. Bella Hawkesby had risen to her feet to step from the dais. In doing so she stumbled, as though accidentally, falling against the young midshipman. The goblet was jerked in his hand, and its contents spilled in a crimson stream over Jean's dainty gown.

A murmur of dismay arose; Jack was almost speechless with remorse and concern. Bella was profuse in her apologies; she snatched up the hem of Jean's silken gown as though to make amends for her clumsiness.

Then she paused, a realistic gasp of surprise escaping her lips.

"Why!" she exclaimed—and her shrill tones sounded clearly above the murmur of voices. The music had unexpectedly ceased. "Why—how strange! Jean's new gown is identical with that piece of silk found by the coastguards—and here's a tear that's been mended recently!"

There was a sudden, tense hush in which a pin could have been heard to drop. The guests were crowding forward. Squire Penhale had risen, and Anne Lorimer moved quickly to her chum's side.

White to the lips, Jean stared round at the accusing faces. The squire's bluff features had taken a stern, questioning look. Even Jack appeared strained in his manner.

The blow had fallen; but Jean's conscience was clear.

"I—I don't understand," she faltered. "The gown was torn when I received it. Father bought it from an itinerant merchant. Oh, you must—you must believe me!"

A cold silence greeted her words; only Anne—most loyal of chums—squeezed her arm reassuringly.

There was a movement in the crowd; the young Romany minstrel elbowed his way forward, with a trace of a swagger.

"Zounds! The maid speaks truly, sir," he declared. "This merchant has been disposing of wares in the neighbouring villages."

Jean flashed him a quick, surprised glance of gratitude, meeting a dare-devil gleam from his dark eyes.

But no one paid attention to the interrupter; the squire, his frown darkening, was comparing the piece of silk with Jean's frock.

Then Bella Hawkesby put in her spoke again.

"Just think of it, Sylvia dear"—she spoke in a stage-whisper, but her words were clearly audible—"we've been associating with the daughter of a wrecker——"

She got no farther, recoiling as Jean's hand met her cheek in a resounding slap.

Jean's eyes were blazing, her cheeks were aflame; she felt too choked to speak.

Alone in the crowd a laughing voice cried "Bravo!"; but indignant, accusing murmurs drowned all else.

"I hate you—all of you!" choked Jean; and turning, she raced from the brilliantly lit ballroom, past startled flunkeys, down endless stairs and out through the great doors into the squally night.

The gale caught her up as though she had been swansdown—buffeting her, tearing at her flimsy gown, blinding her with rain and salt spray.

Sobbing breathlessly, unable to see a hand in front of her, Jean stumbled on. Swaying branches whipped across her face, her feet sunk into deep puddles or became caught up amid the tangled undergrowth.

The night was filled with mad terror.

Above the howl of wind the deep, booming thunder of the surf could be heard as it dashed itself in impotent fury on the cliff.

But Jean's heart leaped with the gale; her one thought was to escape from the house and those within it. She was the daughter of a seafarer—a rover—and the blood of adventurers ran in her veins.

She could not see where she was going, but she stumbled on blindly, fighting the storm, finding relief from her thoughts—the ache at her heart.

Not that she believed the hateful accusation for a moment—but others believed it. Already her father was known as a smuggler; now he would be a hunted man.

At all costs she must find him—warn him—defend his name with her last breath.

"Oh!"

Her blood ran cold as she stumbled, her groping hands clawing at thin air. She felt the ground slipping beneath her feet; the thunder of the surf drowned the shriek of the wind. A pale, watery moon, emerging for an instant from behind the racing clouds, revealed the white foam breaking on the rocks below.

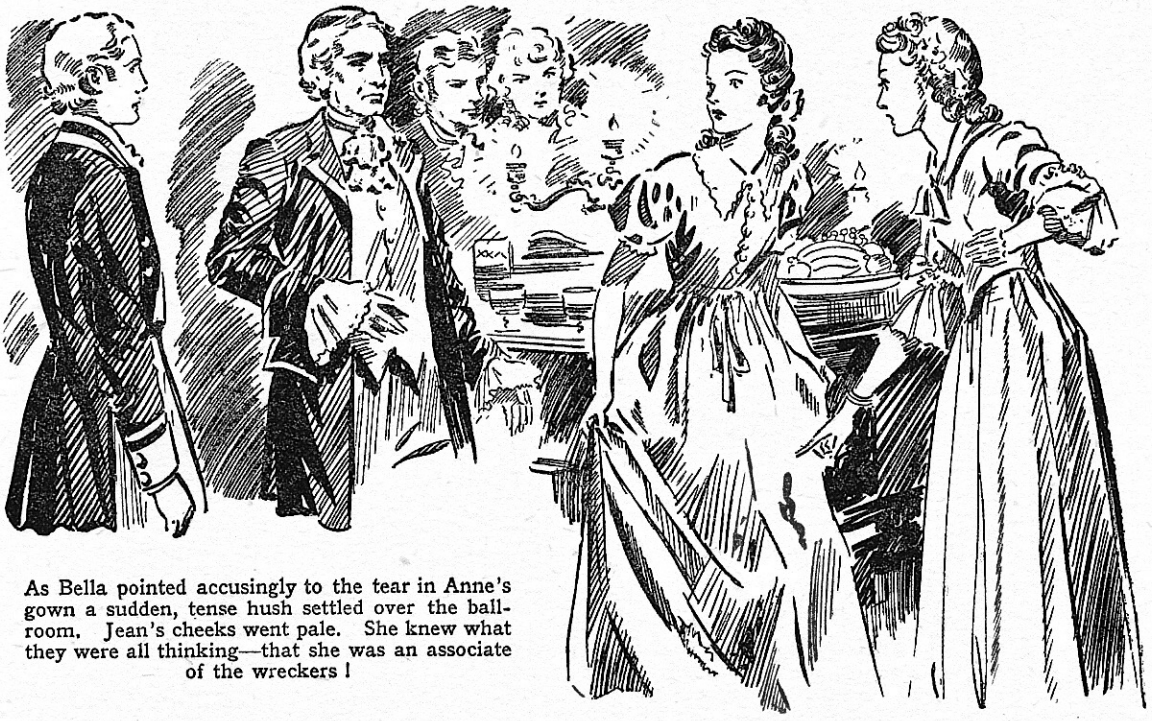
A choking, despairing cry was torn from Jean's lips as the edge of the cliff crumbled beneath her.

Her cry was answered by a shout; a powerful arm caught her by the waist, dragging her back from the precipice.

She heard a voice—husky, breathless—yet with an undertone of banter.

"Zounds, sweet maid—you choose a strange ending for the dance! And without a partner. Fie! I know a better and safer path than this."

A warm cloak was slipped over her trembling shoulders; she saw a pair of dark, quizzical eyes looking down at her. Her rescuer was the young gipsy troubadour!



As Bella pointed accusingly to the tear in Anne's gown a sudden, tense hush settled over the ballroom. Jean's cheeks went pale. She knew what they were all thinking—that she was an associate of the wreckers!

CHAPTER II

FRIEND—OR ENEMY?

JEAN was too dazed even to wonder at the seeming miracle that had brought the young troubadour to her side in the nick of time.

She went with him meekly, unquestioningly, grateful for the strong support of his arm; for she was faint now from the reaction after the strain and excitement

of the last hour, culminating in the terror of storm.

Her rescuer knew the ground well, even in the pitch darkness of the wind-swept night. Not once did he hesitate or stumble as he led her along a lonely track skirting the cliff, and into the comparative shelter of a thickly wooded copse.

The wind moaned and whistled along the branches, but they were screened from its severest buffeting.

The young man barely spoke, except to give brief, almost curt instructions ; once, when the path underfoot became like a quagmire, he halted abruptly.

" Put your hands on my shoulders ! " he ordered ; and as Jean obeyed, unquestioningly, he lifted her in his powerful arms and set off at undiminished speed, his boots squelching in the mud of an overflowing brook.

Jean tried haltingly to thank him—to assure him that she could manage to walk ; but her only reply was a half-cheerful, half-scornful grunt. Evidently the young man has his own opinion about girls.

At length he halted, in a sheltered spot bounded by trees and massive boulders, and lowered her on to firm ground.

" Shucks, my lady, you're wet through and shivering ! " he declared. " What you need is a fire to warm you, and a measure of hot punch."

" And where—where do you think we're going to find that ? "

Jean tried to laugh, though her attempt was nearer tears.

Her amazing companion was unperturbed.

Raising a finger to his lips, he parted the bushes—revealing a dark cavity among the rocks. Taking her arm, he assisted her down a flight of rough-hewn steps into a strange cavern.

Jean saw the red glow of a brazier reflecting on rich carpets, bales of cloth, casks and boxes. Her companion struck a light from a tinder-box, igniting a torch he took from an iron sconce.

He stood before her, a smiling, daredevil figure in his Romany costume—boyish, yet with a certain grim purpose about the lines of his lips.

A sudden suspicion flashed into Jean's mind.

" You—you're no gipsy ! " she breathed.

The boy chuckled, as he tossed his rakish bonnet on to a cask.

" Right, my lady ! Your perception does you credit. This rig-out serves to make a livelihood—e'en though a poor one."

He saw Jean's glance wander towards the tell-tale bales and casks.

" Believe me," he added hastily, " this snug retreat belongs to a worthy friend of mine—a brave fellow for whose honesty I'll vouch." Quickly he changed the subject, as he drew a massive sea-chest towards the brazier, and covered it with rugs as a seat for his youthful guest.

" You are a friend of Squire Penhale's ? " he asked abruptly.

" I am acquainted with his daughter," corrected Jean, " but she is no friend of mine."

" Nor of mine ! Zounds " — the boy flashed her a swift smile—" a paid minstrel cannot choose his company. But, tell me, who was the handsome young midshipman who led you into the dance ? "

Jean hesitated ; after all, she had no idea of her questioner's identity. She owed him her life—but, even so, her natural caution came uppermost.

" Who might you be ? " she countered boldly.

The other grinned.

" A fair question ! My name, dear lady, is Treherne—a good Cornish name. My friends call me Roderick. Are you satisfied ? "

Jean had to smile, in spite of herself. The young troubadour's manner was infectious.

" Almost satisfied," she rejoined cautiously, " but why are you posing as a gipsy troubadour ? "

The boy looked at her in silence for a moment. In spite of herself, Jean was conscious of an uneasy chill—a foreboding she could not have explained had she tried.

He rose to his feet and confronted her, without a trace of his customary swagger.

" Please, Miss Varden," he said quietly, " don't misunderstand me. I'm unable to comply with your request for information

for reasons I may not explain. I ask you to trust me—a vagrant troubadour—for I swear that I'm your friend."

Jean's heart missed a beat. There was something about the boy's earnest tone that increased her foreboding, even while it banished her momentary mistrust.

" I—I do trust you," she whispered, holding out her hand. " You saved my life, and "—her lips trembled—" you very gallantly came to my rescue in the ballroom."

The boy grinned, showing a flash of white teeth against his sun-tanned features. He gripped her hand.

" Thank you for those words, dear lady," he retorted. " They set a seal on our friendship. Jean Varden need have no fear that her trust will be betrayed."

" But how—how do you know my name ? " breathed Jean.

" What matters ? " The boy chuckled. " Enough that I know it—and am pledged to aid its charming owner." He bowed gallantly. " And now "—with sudden seriousness—" what are your plans ? You do not wish to return to the Hall ? "

" No ! " Jean shivered at the thought ; the memory of that dreadful moment could not be effaced. Even now she could hear Bella Hawkesby's shrill, accusing tones ; she could see the squire's stern glance, and hear the horrified murmur that rose above the tense hush.

" The daughter of a wrecker . . ."

" No ! " whispered Jean, half to herself. " Not back there—ever ! "

The boy eyed her curiously, but made no comment ; he seemed to be weighing something in his mind.

" I'll see you on your way home," he rejoined. " But first—something to warm you."

He crossed to a cauldron that swung over the brazier, and ladled some steaming and savoury-smelling broth into a bowl, handing it to Jean with a bow.

" 'Tis humble fare I have to offer you—but you are more than welcome," he remarked with a grave smile.

Jean thanked him gratefully ; the broth was delicious, and it warmed her chilled blood.

As she sipped it, the young troubadour chatted lightly, interposing a careless question now and then—touching on the scene in the ballroom, mentioning Jack Lorimer and inquiring when he was sailing. Jean gave the information almost without realising it. There was something about the boy's earnest manner that had completely won her trust.

As the hour grew late he began to show signs of uneasiness, and insisted on accompanying her as far as the road that led to her cottage home.

" Au revoir, dear lady," he murmured, pressing her hand as they parted at the lonely cross-roads. " I'll not say ' Adieu ' —as I believe we'll meet again ere long ! "

Jean had cause to remember those words, and the boy's half-serious, half-joking tone, before many hours had elapsed.

The blood was coursing more swiftly in her veins as she hurried on her way. The young troubadour had wished to accompany her as far as her door, but Jean had refused his offer.

She wanted to be alone—to make up her mind on a certain course of action.

The first shock of Bella's spiteful accusation had numbed her heart—but her meeting with the young troubadour had helped her to regain her natural spirit.

Bella's hateful lie could not be ignored ; the vile rumour must be stopped ere it spread farther. Her father must be warned !

She hurried on through the wind-swept darkness following the familiar road that led to the cottage. She strained her eyes for a glimmer of light from the windows, wondering if her father had returned. But no welcome gleam relieved the shadows.

The cottage lay back from the road, approached by a narrow path through the thicket. The path was uneven and slippery and Jean had to slacken her pace. As she did so, she heard a mutter of voices that seemed to come from among the trees.

Instinctively she halted, her suspicions aroused—and her fears. Men's gruff voices, speaking in cautious undertones. Jean plucked up her courage and edged nearer.

" Ha' ye the message, Jake ? "

" Aye—it's here, Long Will. The guv'nor's orders. There be a merchantman sailin' at high tide, wi' a fast frigate escortin' her. Pickin's for one an' all—if we get her on to the Thatcher ! "

A callous laugh—a laugh that chilled the blood in Jean's veins.

How had the news leaked out ? What were these men plotting ?

" Pickin's for all of us—they say she's carryin' gold ! But mind 'ee, Long Will, there must be no bungling this time. The guv'nor swears he'll show no mercy if the Preventive Men get wind of the job. It's to be a wreck—an accident, see ? No one'll be the wiser when the morning comes."

Jean felt frozen with horror—unable to move or cry out. She was listening to a deliberate cold-blooded plot to wreck a defenceless ship for the sake of its gold—the ship that Jack Lorimer was sailing with that night !

Someone had betrayed the secret to the wreckers !

Who could she warn ? If only her father were at hand—or her mystery friend, the young troubadour. She strained her ears to catch further details of the dastardly plan.

" Who brought the message ? " demanded the man who had first spoken.

" Who d'you imagine ? " demanded his companion with a short laugh. " The guv'nor's new lieutenant—the gipsy troubadour. If there's dark work brewin', he's the lad for it ! "

A choking sob was stifled in Jean's throat ; she recoiled, her hands clenched.

Roderick Treherne—the laughing troubadour, the boy who had saved her life ! He had betrayed her trust in him, cunningly wheedling from her the information to further his dastardly plans.

He was the young leader of the wreckers !

" No ! " whispered Jean brokenly. " No—it can't be true ! "

But though her lips framed the denial, her heart was cold.

It all fitted in so well—the mysterious boy, his evasive answers to her questions, his curiosity about her friend Jack Lorimer, and the young midshipman's movements.

He had won her trust—only to betray it, deliberately, with villainous intent.

And she had imagined that he was her friend !

Angrily Jean forced back the smarting tears that sprang into her eyes. This was no time for weakness ! A friend's life was at stake—two ships with their valiant crews were in mortal peril.

Unless she acted swiftly they would be lured to their fate on the deadly rocks.

Jean's hands clenched as she edged slowly away from the thicket, fearful lest the hidden scoundrels should discover her presence. She was grateful for the howl of the wind and the lashing of the rain on the foliage ; it helped to cover her movements.

Venturing into the open she sped for dear life towards the cottage. It was in darkness—desolate and seemingly forsaken. Jean rapped at the door, receiving no reply. Her father had not returned.

Her heart sank—but she was not beaten yet. Another plan came to her. She would write down what she had heard, while the plotters' words were still fresh in her mind, and run with the message to the coastguard station.

With this idea she made her way round to the back of the house where she knew that a small door was usually kept on the latch.

To her surprise the door stood slightly ajar, but she put that down to the force of the gale. Opening the door wide, she stepped into the darkened kitchen.

There was a movement in shadows—a scream was torn from Jean's lips as a hand gripped her arm.

There came the creak of a dark lantern ; its yellow flickering light streamed on to Jean's face, reflecting dimly on the features of her captor. The boyish features of the young troubadour !

His twisted smile gave no hint of his thoughts, but his voice was husky as he spoke :

" So, Miss Varden, we meet again—sooner than I expected ! "

"So we have a spy in our midst," declared a cold, grim voice. Jean could hardly believe her ears, for it seemed that the young gipsy troubadour—the boy she had trusted—was the leader of the notorious band of wreckers!

CHAPTER III

THE WRECKERS MUST BE OUTWITTED

JEAN recoiled, wrenching her arm free.

"You!" she exclaimed.

Her eyes blazed scornfully and an angry flush suffused her cheeks.

The young troubadour encountered her accusing stare, apparently unmoved.

"I fear I startled you," he murmured. "Forgive me, dear lady. My intrusion can be explained. I had business with your father, and as I received no reply I took the liberty of entering——"

"I don't believe you!" gasped Jean. She faced him, white now in her anger. "You have no business with my father—you—a wrecker!"

The boy started, biting his lip. His dark eyes became suddenly grim.

"Miss Varden, you don't realise what you are saying——"

"I do!" exclaimed Jean recklessly. "I have proof. I was a blind fool ever to trust you. I—I——" Her voice choked. "I've betrayed my own friends, but thank goodness I found out in time."

She made for the door.

"Wait!" exclaimed the boy sharply. "Don't be a little idiot!"

He sprang after her, but Jean was too quick for him. The gale buffeted her as she raced into the open.

"Stop!" shouted young Treherne, his voice sounding distant in the howl of the storm. "Come back——"

"All right, guv'nor!" replied a harsh voice, unexpectedly, from the bushes.

With a sobbing gasp Jean drew back as two figures loomed in the shadows before her. She was trapped!

Rough hands grasped her by the shoulder; two villainous faces peered into her own.

"Aye—it's the same wench!" snarled one of the men. "She who was spyin' on us not five minutes ago. I caught a glimpse of her as she ran. She's learnt our plans, chief——"

White to the lips, Jean was thrust forward to confront the young troubadour.

His boyish face was pale, but his lips were set in a thin, cruel line. His dark eyes glittered sternly.

"So," he remarked coldly, "we have a spy in our midst!" Jean scarcely recognised his voice; it was hard as steel, and as merciless. "Good work, Jake," he added, "you can leave the wench to me. Spies—even pretty spies—must have their lips sealed, for good."

As he spoke he whipped a scarf deftly round her mouth, stifling her cry for help. The next moment her hands were secured neatly behind her back.

"Smart work, chief!" chuckled one of the men.

Jean struggled impotently, fear and anger mingled in her heart, but it was anger that came uppermost—anger and a feeling of bitter disillusionment in the boy she had trusted.

He was an unscrupulous rogue—and worse.

"You know the plans, Jake—and you, Long Will?" he demanded tersely. "You had them from the Chief?"

"Aye, aye, sir," came the gruff rejoinder. "We're to follow the orders as before. We move the light from Thatcher Rock and place it down by the bay. It's a rare plan, mister. Ship's cap'n sees the light, sheers off the bay, and goes to pieces on the Thatcher! Cracked like a nut, she'll be, an' the cargo waiting for salvin'."

Jean's blood ran cold as she heard them laugh; she could have sobbed in her helplessness to foil the dastardly plot—the plan that took no count of innocent human lives.

And one the life of gallant Jack Lorimer, friend of her schooldays—brother of her dearest chum.

Vainly she struggled to wrench her hands free, to throw off the hateful scarf that muffled her cries.

She heard the gruff laughs fade into the distance, the hand that grasped her arm tightened.

"Forgive me," said a low voice, "but it was necessary. Maybe you'll understand——"

The scarf was whipped from her face and the young troubadour bent to loosen the cord that bound her wrists.

Jean's mind was in a whirl; she felt faint, weak from the reaction of her

desperate struggle. She swayed dizzily and would have fallen if the boy's strong arm had not supported her.

" There's not a moment to lose ! " he breathed. " You heard the plot ? I had to take a risk to gain their confidence—it was the only way. Do you feel well enough to walk ? "

Jean stared at him dazedly, uncomprehending. The boy's callous manner had slipped from him like a cloak ; there was a breathless urgency in his tone—his dark eyes appealed rather than commanded.

" What—what do you mean ? " she faltered. Sudden suspicion flashed into her mind. " This—this is another hateful trick ! I don't trust you——"

" You must trust me ! " urged the boy huskily. " Don't you understand ? I had to play this part—for the sake of your father, and your friends. I need your help, now, Jean—if we're to save the lives of innocent men. Will you aid me ? "

Still Jean hesitated, while the storm howled round them and the boom of the waves sounded like muffled gun-fire.

Yet a gleam of desperate hope had crept into the turmoil of her thoughts.

" My father," she whispered, " where is he, now ? "

" A prisoner ! " rejoined the boy tersely. " He strove to unearth this dastardly plot —to bring the wreckers to book—but he fell into their hands before the trap could be sprung. He left certain instructions with me, in case the worst happened ; he was afraid for your safety—and not without cause. Do you understand now why I followed you from the dance ? Do you believe me ? "

With a stifled sob Jean caught at his strong hand ; the light of understanding banished her last doubts.

" Yes ! " she breathed. " Quickly—what do you want me to do ? How can I help ? "

She heard the boy's quick sigh of relief as he gripped her hand. Then he stiffened, peering through the wind-swept darkness towards the cliffs.

" Jean—look ! " he exclaimed huskily.

Jean followed the direction of his glance and her heart seemed to stand still.

Far out in that inky blackness where lay the sea, lights glimmered—the lights of two ships tossing on the giant waves ; a heavily laden merchantman, escorted by an armed frigate.

And on one of those ships was her chum's brother—midshipman Jack Lorimer !

Her companion pointed again, this time towards the cliffs—and Jean's blood ran cold.

For the beacon lantern that always swung on the cruel Thatcher Rock had vanished—and high in his crow's-nest, the frigate's look-out would watch for the warning gleam in vain.

The wreckers' dastardly plan was already clear. Unless help came swiftly, the luckless ships would crash to their doom on the hungry rocks.

" Listen," jerked the boy, thrusting a scrap of paper into Jean's hand, " can you run to the coastguard station with this message ? I need men—armed men—as many as they can muster. There's not an instant to lose ! "

" But—the light," faltered Jean. " The beacon——"

" Leave that to me," rapped the boy. " The beacon'll shine again on Thatcher Rock to-night—or I'll know the reason ! To the coastguard station—and good luck, Jean ! "

A swift pressure of the hand, and he was gone—into the night. Jean's heart bounded with awakened resolve as she set out in the gale, conscious that she was no longer alone in her purpose—that her ally was a fearless and resourceful boy who would do everything possible to help her and those dear to her.

Breathless, dishevelled, the salt spray in her eyes and streaming down her cheeks, Jean reached the coastguard station and gasped out her message.

At first they would not believe her ; they obviously looked on her story as a wild flight of girlish imagination. Then Jean suddenly remembered the crumpled and soaked missive she had thrust into the pocket of her coat.

With trembling fingers she passed it to the captain of the coastguards. The man opened it with a slightly impatient frown ;

then his expression changed. A startled whistle escaped his lips.

" Egad—the wench speaks the truth ! This makes bad reading. Squire Penhale must be warned, while we round up the gang——"

" There's not a minute to lose ! " gasped Jean, her hands clenched. " The ships are out there now, in the storm—barely a mile from the Thatcher Rock. You must send help—quickly ! "

The coastguards exchanged glances ; their captain spoke tolerantly :

" We've got to summon the rest of our men, missy—these things can't be done in a minute. Then the Squire's the local Justice—we must inform him. But don't you worry."

With a sob of exasperation, Jean turned on them.

" If you can't do anything, then—then I'll try alone ! " she gasped, and ran out of the building.

" Wait, missy ! " shouted the coastguard's captain. " There are desperate men waiting on the rocks down there."

But Jean did not wait to listen ; she was racing down the sloping path that led to the cliffs, the wind behind her now, almost sweeping her off her feet.

In the cliff itself was a narrow, treacherous cutting known as the Pirate's Steps ; a rough stairway had been hewn there in the dim past, and the steps still remained, though crumbling and slippery.

At the foot of the cliff was a desolate cabin, once used by fishermen—now a receptacle for ancient tar-barrels and rotting nets.

Reaching this, Jean paused to gain her breath. She had already formed a desperate plan. In the hut, she knew, were several old storm-lanterns. She meant to light these and place them on a ledge of the cliff within sight of the Thatcher Rock —in the forlorn hope that the ship's lookout would see their tiny beams.

She knew that to do so would probably bring the wreckers on her heels—but she was ready to risk it.

But as she stumbled down the narrow path that led to the cabin, she realised with a sinking heart that others were there before her !

Figures were moving in the shadows—stealthily, with grim purpose. She saw three of them over the rocks, taking shelter behind the giant boulders.

Then she saw what they were watching, and her heart stood still. A light swung on the storm-swept beach ; lantern in hand, a boyish figure was examining the moorings of a fishing-boat—and as he straightened himself the yellow light revealed his features.

The young troubadour !

His purpose seemed plain. He meant to row out to the Thatcher Rock, to light the emergency lantern attached to the great buoy.

And his concealed watchers had evidently guessed his purpose. Jean, who was barely a yard away, invisible in the shadows, saw one of the men raise something to his shoulder—and level it at the unwary boy.

A flint-lock gun !

" Roderick—look out ! "

The warning cry was torn from Jean's lips, and carried on the gale. A shot rang out as Roderick dropped like a stone.

There was an answering shot, as the boy whipped out a pistol ; the man staggered back, slapping a hand to his wrist. His companion snatched a cutlass from his belt, and would have attacked the fallen boy if Jean had not acted.

With desperate courage she flung a handful of small stones, effectively distracting the scoundrels' attention.

By then, Roderick was on his feet. The man with the cutlass was sent sprawling by a well-aimed blow to the jaw ; his companion was already helpless, his arm limp from the well-aimed shot. The third man took to his heels, obviously intending to bring help from the gang.

Panting, the young troubadour reached Jean's side ; for an instant his hand gripped her.

" I owe you my life, this time, Jean," he said huskily. " But there's no time to lose. We've got to get a light, somehow—to warn those ships. They've cut the buoy adrift. Quickly—this way ! "

He snatched up the lantern, leading the

way up the narrow slope to the fisherman's hut.

Jean could hear the waves breaking in fury on the Thatcher Rock—as though impatient for their prey.

Out there on the storm-tossed sea the two ships were nearing the rocks—tricked by the wreckers' false signal.

"Open the lantern, Jean!" breathed Roderick. "Quickly!" She saw he held a length of tarred rope in his hand. The next moment it flared up like a giant taper.

"Stand clear!" he panted. "I guarantee they'll see a flame they won't mistake!"

As he spoke he flung the blazing rope into the shed; it alighted on an open barrel of tar, piled with sacking and nets. With a sudden roar, the old hut literally went up in flames.

Jean gasped as she stood close beside Roderick on the cliff path. The sea was lit up by the lurid flame—the cruel rocks were silhouetted in black relief.

"We're just in time!" gasped the boy. "Look!"

Jean gave a little cry of relief. She saw the great merchantman and its escorting frigate swing suddenly in the wind, veering away from the deadly rocks. At the same instant a rocket was sent up from the leading ship, signifying that the warning had been seen.

And just then there was a furious shout; dark figures were racing madly along the beach. The wreckers, frustrated in their prey, were seeking vengeance.

Jean felt Roderick's arm tighten round her.

"Get behind me—out of sight!" breathed the boy, drawing his pistol.

But Jean clung to him.

"No—look! Rescue's coming!" she cried.

Other figures appeared now, streaming down the steps—burly armed men carrying lanterns—their leader an officer with drawn sword.

A hoarse shout went up from the startled wreckers.

"The Preventive Men! We're betrayed!"

The scuffle that ensued was swiftly over. The handcuffed scoundrels were brought up the beach, and by the lantern Roderick and the coastguards officer surveyed their scowling features.

"Run with this to the coastguard station," the young troubadour urged. "I need men—armed men—as many as they can muster." And he thrust the note into Jean's hand.

The officer gave a gasp of disappointment.

"The villain who is their leader does not appear to be here," he said.

Roderick smiled grimly.

"No—but he's not far away," he said. "Come with me. You, too, sweet maid," he added, turning to where Jean stood.

Leaving the captured band in charge of the coastguards, they made their way to the foot of the cliffs.

While the officer and Jean watched wonderingly, the young troubadour bent before a huge boulder that stood against tne rocky wall, grasping it with both hands.

Exerting his strength, he pushed, and to Jean's amazement the great boulder rolled aside, revealing the entrance to a great cavern—a cavern that was stacked with loot from a dozen wrecked ships.

From the vaulted roof hung a lantern, and its light revealed two figures—one a tall ruffian whose features were covered with a scarf; the other a bound and gagged man at the sight of whom Jean gave a cry.

" Father ! " she gasped.

At the sound of her voice the other man —the leader of The Wreckers—swung round in alarm, one hand dropping to the pistol stuck in his sash. But before he could use it Roderick had leapt forward.

Out went his fist, and the unknown crashed to the ground, the scarf slipping away from his face.

" Silas Hawkesby ! " gasped Jean in surprise. " The bailiff ! "

It was a staggering shock for her to learn that the leader of the notorious gang of Wreckers was the father of Bella, the girl whose spiteful behaviour had caused Jean so much pain this evening.

While Roderick and the officer made the furious ruffian a prisoner, Jean wrestled with the bonds which secured her father and wrenched away the cruel gag which bound his mouth. Gratefully Mr. Varden scrambled to his feet.

" Father ! " With a little sobbing cry of relief, she flung herself into his arms—while Roderick stood by, a smile on his good-looking, boyish face.

" Good work, Penhale my boy ! " exclaimed the officer, shaking Roderick's hand.

Jean stared, looking wonderingly at her father.

He chuckled, patting her shoulder.

" Aye, lass—young Roderick is the squire's nephew ! He got into disgrace a few months back through Hawkesby's plotting, and, having disguised himself, joined me in secret.

" Together we laid our plans to round up the gang—but it was a narrow thing. Those scoundrels would have given me short shrift if young Roderick hadn't pulled off to-night's work successfully."

" And if it wasn't for Jean, sir," declared the boy, smiling, " I wouldn't have been here to tell the tale ! "

Jean met his bantering gaze as he removed his disguising wig and stepped forward in the glare of the swinging lanterns. Their hands clasped in a grip of renewed friendship and understanding.

Mr. Varden smiled as he glanced at them.

" Come," he said, " to Monks Lynn Hall ! To-night we'll surprise the squire and his guests with a story the like of which they've never heard before—and this officer will stand as witness."

" Come, Jean," breathed Roderick, taking her arm with a boyishly possessive gesture. " You've got to tell your chum that her brother is safe. Besides "—his dark eyes twinkled—" I've been waiting all the evening for the pleasure of a waltz with you ; the last waltz ! "

The storm howled its fury behind them, but Jean did not care. The Smuggler's Daughter was the happiest girl in Cornwall that night.

SOLUTION TO HOLIDAY CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Across : 1. Swimsuits. 5. Kit. 7. Bore. 9. Ire. 10. Awe. 11. Ply. 13. Netball. 14. Eat. 16. Ham. 17. Asp. 19. Dels. 20. Yes. 21. Singsongs.

Down : 1. Stir. 2. Snowballs. 3. Ice. 4. Sail. 5. Kite. 6. Tent. 7. Bathe. 8. Reams 11. Play. 12. Yaps. 15. Ants. 18. Seas. 19. Den.

The IMPOSTOR She Trusted

Why should Gordon Finch pretend he had an injured arm? Was it just a ruse to gain entrance to the house? Daphne Dane's friends believed so, but, despite the mystery boy's suspicious behaviour, Daphne herself found it impossible to dislike him.

By
HILARY MARLOW

CHAPTER I

THE BROKEN FESTOONS

"You can't possibly stay out here—freezing in a broken-down ambulance!" exclaimed Daphne Dane, sympathetically. "On Christmas Eve, and with an injured arm, too—oh, I'm so sorry, Monica!" she added, with a breathless, rather shamefaced smile. "I'm quite forgetting——"

Daphne was forgetting that she herself was only a visitor to Elmsleigh, the fine old Georgian house standing grandly behind its snow-covered garden—forgetting that she hadn't even set foot inside it yet!

But curly-haired Monica Tressidy laughed with cheery reassurance.

"That's all right, Daphne—you've only taken the words out of my mouth!" she declared. "If the ambulance driver's walking to Frossly to get a can of petrol he may be gone a couple of hours. So if——"

"My name's Gordon Finch," volunteered the good-looking, spectacled boy in the stranded ambulance.

"Then if you'll come in with us, Gordon," Monica invited at once, "there'll be a fire in Mrs. Martin's room, and she'll soon make you a cup of coffee."

Yet it was still Daphne who impulsively extended a friendly hand to help the injured boy alight. He accepted her aid with a grateful grin.

"Yoicks!" Monica cried, a moment later. "Christians awake, and make the welkin ring! I'll race anyone to the house!"

She fled gaily along the snowy path as she spoke, with four girls pelting after her. That was quite as natural for them as for Daphne to follow more sedately, accompanying the boy from the broken-down ambulance.

For, only a couple of days ago, her own prospects for Christmas had been the bleakest imaginable.

Her parents ill, with a mild but infectious complaint, her own home closed and cold—there had seemed nothing Daphne could do but stay on at school, to spend the festive season alone in a little room in the caretaker's lodge. From that dreary plight Monica had saved her by this generous invitation for her to join her own special chums.

" I expect," said Gordon " that you're looking forward to having a high old time ! "

Daphne nodded, a tiny lump in her throat. It was a reflection of her own gratitude to Monica which had made her feel so sorry for the injured boy in the freezing ambulance. For, though she was friendly enough with Monica at school, she wasn't in her " set." That was why she felt it was especially kind of them to have invited her home.

But now the door was open, and Daphne, a trifle shyly, entered a spacious hall where a crackling log fire filled the place with welcoming light and warmth.

Monica's mother greeted them all in turn. Though she had never met Daphne before her handshake was especially warm.

" My dear, I was delighted to hear Monica was bringing you;" she declared. " I want this to be the happiest Christmas you've ever spent."

" Thank you very much," Daphne replied, with a happy smile. " I'm sure it'll be lovely."

The hall was filled with their merry chatter when Mrs. Tressidy's questioning look caused Daphne to glance back to the doorway. Just inside, wearing a slightly apologetic smile, stood Gordon. His injured arm, when everyone else seemed so full of the joy of life, made him look almost pathetic at that moment. The others seemed to have forgotten about him completely for the moment.

" We asked him—I mean, Monica invited him in," Daphne explained, making that hasty correction, and in a few words explained the circumstances in which they had met outside. Gordon came forward to help her out with details. Neither of them noticed a thin, sallow-faced man hastening down the staircase, until——

" What on earth ! "

The startled exclamation caused them all to turn in astonishment. For the man was staring at Gordon as though he beheld a ghost !

" Luke, what's wrong ? " asked Mrs. Tressidy, startled. " Do you know Gordon Finch ? "

The sallow man had regained his composure almost instantly. His thin lips curved in a queer little smile.

" Oh, no," he said, hastily. " I'm afraid I've made a rather foolish mistake. Just for the moment he reminded me of a boy we had working here last year at Christmas time, before you took over the house. I can see there's little resemblance now. I've finished typing your letters——"

" Then I'll sign at once, while there's still time to catch the post," Mrs. Tressidy decided, and Luke Warmsley stood deferentially aside, then followed softly as she made her way upstairs.

Anxious to make amends for her understandable forgetfulness, Monica took charge of Gordon again. They soon found pleasant little Mrs. Martin, the housekeeper, and explained that she was to look after Gordon until the ambulance driver returned with petrol for the van outside.

" Just as you wish, Miss Monica," Mrs. Martin agreed, as she led the way to her room.

Daphne was quick to notice the puzzled expression on Monica's face.

" I rather expected Marty to be a bit more thrilled ! " Monica explained, as she took Daphne's arm warmly, and they walked back to join the others. " Nothing in it, of course, only Marty's usually fearfully concerned about anyone the least bit hurt. We always say she'd sit up all night even with an injured sparrow. P'raps she's feeling a bit tired."

There was little time for Daphne to think about the housekeeper, however, for things started to happen at breathless speed now they had had time to realise they were really home for Christmas. She had hardly taken in any of the details of her charming little room before Monica

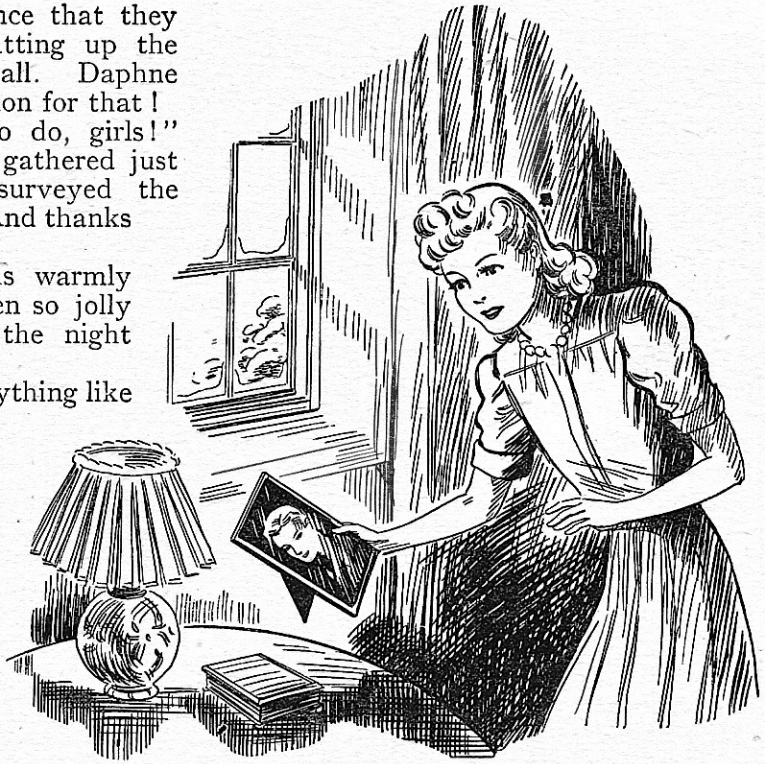
was at the door, to announce that they were all ready to start putting up the decorations in the dining-hall. Daphne didn't want a second invitation for that!

"Left specially for us to do, girls!" Monica announced, as they gathered just inside the doorway and surveyed the beautiful, panelled room. "And thanks to Daphne——"

"Hear, hear!" a chorus warmly agreed. "If she hadn't been so jolly clever, and sat up half the night making things——"

"We wouldn't have had anything like this gorgeous selection!" Monica crowed, as she opened a suitcase, and lightly shook the coloured festoons out.

Daphne flushed with pleasure at their praise. She had certainly scoured the school, high and low, for oddments and cuttings of coloured paper otherwise destined for the waste collection. Her clever brain and nimble fingers were mainly responsible for giving them this extension of life over Christmas, before they finally went for salvage. And how she had enjoyed doing it!



Daphne gave a startled gasp as she recognised the portrait. The mystery that surrounded Gordon Finch had taken an even more puzzling turn.

"Two beauties here—Tess, grab an end!" Monica chortled. "Flo and Babs, get cracking with this one!"

They were soon going up; Daphne's ingenious paper flowers, mingled with decorative dark leaves, began to span the room in cascades of delightful colour.

"If only we could fix one to that far corner!" Monica suddenly speculated.

Daphne looked up quickly. She could see it was the very spot for a cross festoon, but it could be fixed only to a beam very close to the wall. She would have to slide her hand behind it.

"I can do it, Monica," she volunteered; and, slipping off her wrist-watch to save it from possible injury, she laid it on the window ledge and climbed on a high chair. "If you'll give me the end——"

"There it is!" said Monica, and stepped back to admire, as the last festoon rose into position. "Wizard!" was her exclamation of unqualified approval.

They all agreed. The dining-hall was transformed; it really looked as Christmasy as it ought at this festive season.

"Daphne, my clever child, we really owe you a hearty vote of thanks for all you have done," said Monica; giving her a hug. "Now I'll really let you go to your room and unpack. But don't be too long—there's lots more to arrange!"

Daphne believed she had never been so happy in her life as she hung her things up in the wardrobe in her charming little room. What a marvellous Christmas it was going to be!

Then, all at once, she thought of Gordon. She crossed to the window and looked out; the stranded ambulance was still in the road. But the sky was now full of heavy snow clouds, and it looked as though a real blizzard might burst at any moment.

Wondering how long the driver had been gone already, she glanced at her wrist.

" My watch—I left it on the window ledge in the dining-hall," she recollected ; and sped downstairs to retrieve it. The others were still in their rooms. Silently Daphne moved along the thick-carpeted passage and opened the door in the dining-hall. And there, on the threshold, she stopped dead in consternation.

The room was no longer empty, nor were the decorations as she had seen them last.

Two of the long festoons were down, lying crumpled across the table. Fumbling with the torn end of one of them was none other than—Gordon Finch ! And even that was not all !

The boy who had entered the house with his arm in a sling had come amongst them as an impostor. For the sling hung limp against his chest, and he was using both hands with perfect ease !

" What on earth are you up to ? " Daphne demanded, her voice ringing with indignation.

The boy dropped the end of the festoon and turned with a start of dismay.

" I—I say, I'm terribly sorry about this ! " he stammered. " I hoped to get them up again before anyone saw them. I'd heard Mrs. Martin saying how pretty the room looked." His eyes widened as he saw the look of stern disapproval on Daphne's face. " I say, I hope you don't think I yanked them down myself ! " he said in a horrified voice.

" Who else would ? " Daphne demanded.

" Search me ! " Gordon blankly answered. " I thought they'd just fallen, and I might be able to put them up again. But look—they're torn. That's why I was having such trouble with them."

Daphne was already looking at the broken ends.

" I can soon put that right," she said. " That's not the point. Why aren't you still in the housekeeper's room ? "

" I wanted to 'phone the garage where my driver's gone for petrol," Gordon replied. " He ought to know where to look for me."

" And your injured arm ? " asked Daphne coldly.

Gordon gave her a confiding smile that somehow seemed to damp all her indignation completely.

" It's really just an official practice," he confessed. " I'm terribly sorry about it all, but I'm employed at the hospital and have to do as I'm told. I never intended to take anyone in. And honestly, I couldn't foresee this happening. Besides, when you were all so jolly sympathetic that—well, I'd have made you look rather foolish if I'd owned up to the truth. Besides "—his eyes twinkled irresistibly behind his spectacles—" it was cold out there and a cup of coffee did sound good."

Daphne had to laugh in spite of herself. Though the mystery of the torn decorations remained, she couldn't help believing Gordon was telling her the truth.

" You slip off and 'phone, and leave this to me," she told him. " I made them, so I know how to put them right again."

" You're a sport—thanks a million ! " said Gordon, gratefully, as he went.

The repairs were soon effected, and the decorations looked little the worse for their queer accident. Finished at last, Daphne crossed to the window, only to stop with a little gasp as she looked at the ledge. Her watch was no longer there !

" Perhaps the housekeeper's looking after it," Daphne reflected, remembering how Gordon had said she had been praising the decorations.

Anxious to retrieve it, she hastened along to " Marty's " room. The door was ajar ; her knock on the panels caused it to open fully. There was nobody inside.

Daphne was about to turn away when she paused. Her keen eyes had just observed something very unusual. On the housekeeper's tidy little table on the corner stood a photograph frame. It had been deliberately turned to face the corner.

Some unaccountable instinct of curiosity got hold of Daphne at that unusual sight. It only meant her taking a couple of steps into the little room. For a moment she hesitated ; then, with quick decision, picked the frame up and turned it round.

It was the photograph of a good-looking boy.

Save for the spectacles he was now wearing, it was a picture of the very boy who called himself—Gordon Finch!

Dizzily Daphne put the picture back as she had found it, left the room, and closed the door behind her.

Luke Warmsley, the pale-faced secretary, had first of all thought he recognised Gordon. Mrs. Martin, with a reputation for being of such an intensely sympathetic nature had received Gordon with marked coolness.

Was it entirely an accident that the van had broken down outside this very house, the door open, and Gordon sitting so pathetically inside, just when the girls arrived for Christmas?

CHAPTER II

DAPHNE DID NOT DOUBT HIM

"GORDON will be all right, after all, girls," Monica announced, as she joined the others in the big playroom upstairs. "It was idiotic of his ambulance driver to buzz off without making any inquiry here, of course, but I suppose he didn't want to be caught in the blizzard."

Daphne's private prophecy had been swiftly fulfilled. Snow was falling heavily from the dark clouds, and a keen, blustering wind, was whirling it in fitful flurries against the windows. During the early part of the snowstorm the ambulance outside had vanished unnoticed.

"Did you 'phone the hospital, Monica?" Daphne asked.

"I did," Monica replied. "I told a rather surprised matron that she'd no right to leave her cases lying about all over the place. She didn't seem to be very worried about Gordon's arm. Anyway, she promised another ambulance will call for him as soon as there's one available."

"Oh, good," said Daphne.

"Now we can all give our minds to charades," said Monica with a smile. "Let's make a start on number one!"

Daphne's eyes had a rather faraway expression, for she was thinking about Gordon. That he was attractive, there was no doubt. But she was a little uneasy. He was an impostor. He had had some reason of his own for wanting to get into the house. She, quite unwittingly, had helped him. She would be more comfortable in her mind when she knew he was gone again.

It proved a very jolly rehearsal. Things went so well, and there was so much fun in dressing up and playing different parts, that the time simply flew. Monica whistled as she suddenly looked at her watch.

"Four o'clock! Daphne, I wonder if you'd be a pet," she said, "and have a peep downstairs to see if there's any sign of tea yet."

Daphne was only too pleased to go. Downstairs she found a big commotion on; in the servants' quarters some big packing cases had just been undone, and everyone was lending a hand to unload them. There was no sign that anyone had even thought of getting tea.

She was just about to return upstairs with the tidings when a voice spoke softly behind her.

"Could you possibly spare me a moment, Miss Daphne?"

Daphne turned, to see Gordon Finch standing only a couple of paces away.

"You didn't get your 'phone message through to the garage in time, I hear!" said Daphne, rather more abruptly than she really meant.

"I should have thought of 'phoning sooner," Gordon agreed. "I'm terribly sorry I've made myself such a nuisance." He came a step closer, his expression changing. "Funnily enough, though, I'm glad as well!"

Daphne raised her brows sharply.

"Glad? What about?"

The half-smile faded from the boy's attractive face, but his steady eyes met her enquiring look as frankly as ever.

"Because it gives me a chance to tell you the truth!" he unexpectedly confessed.

"The truth?" said Daphne, really startled.

"You've been so jolly decent to me that I owe that much to you," the boy

answered. " Luke Warmsley was quite right. Of course he recognised me at once. I used to work here last Christmas. My real name's Martin."

Daphne caught her breath. That turned photograph !

" I left here in disgrace—you may as well know that as well," Gordon rushed on. " And all I want you to believe about me is one thing—it wasn't my fault ! I was absolutely innocent of what they said about me." He swallowed hard. " That's why I came back and my real reason for wanting to get in here to-day ! "

He bit his lower lip as he spoke and somehow Daphne felt strangely moved. She couldn't help believing him, even though she realised she had only his word. Yet caution still prompted her strongly to have a care.

" I don't know," Daphne mused, " whether you've chosen the best way to come back ! "

Again she knew she sounded harder than she meant to be.

" That's a fair remark," Gordon agreed. " What you don't know is that there's some very great mystery about this house. I've thought it over and over and I—I believe I can solve it if I have the chance."

" Gordon ! " ejaculated Daphne, unable to keep the thrill out of her voice this time.

" And I want to do this for—mother, Miss Daphne ! " Boylike, he grinned sheepishly, half-ashamed of the admission he had made. " I mean, it's been so much worse for her than me. She's had to stick it here, and put up with all Luke Warmsley's mean cracks about me."

His face had become set again, and Daphne found herself giving an understanding nod. She had glimpsed Luke once or twice, moving softly around the house. There was something about him she instinctively disliked.

" It's for mother's sake I want to clear my name," said Gordon softly. " It'd be the best Christmas present in the world. And if Christmas means as much to you as——"

" Why, there she is, Miss Monica ! " a man's voice ejaculated at that very moment. " She's down in the hall—talking to Gordon ! "

Daphne turned sharply, and her heart gave an uncomfortable throb as Luke Warmsley came running down the stairs, followed by Monica and the other girls. Only then did she realise how she had completely forgotten the errand on which Monica had sent her.

" I'm sorry about tea—there's no sign of it yet ! " Daphne explained. " I was just coming back——"

She broke off. Monica was staring at her with anything but approval. The others looked rather taken aback, too. And on Luke's thin, pale face there was the ghost of a grin which made Daphne feel instantly suspicious.

He had been saying something to the girls. And it was something about herself, or Gordon, or perhaps the pair of them. That was to be expected, of course. Undoubtedly he knew who Gordon really was.

Luke came on down to the foot of the stairs, whilst the girls stopped in a rather self-conscious cluster a few steps from the bottom. He passed Daphne and walked softly to where Gordon was standing.

" I thought you were supposed to be in the housekeeper's room," he said. " Mrs. Tressidy's instructions were—look out ! "

Daphne's heart gave a leap at that unexpected cry. For Luke's next action was even more startling. He appeared to lurch forward, bumping heavily against Gordon's shoulder. At the same moment one of his long legs shot out right in front of Gordon's feet.

Before the boy could attempt to save himself, he had pitched forward, tripped over that foot, and sprawled on the ground.

" Oh ! His arm ! " Babs gasped in horror.

" His arm ? " Monica repeated in astounded tones. " Why, look—it's quite all right now ! He snatched it out of the sling instantly to save himself ! There's nothing the matter with it at all ! "

It was true. Gordon was scrambling to his feet again. He had been caught right off his guard by the crafty Luke.

He knew it was no good pretending any longer.

" Just as I thought ! " declared Luke Warmsley in gloating tones. " I've had an idea all along Gordon Finch was an impostor. He's been taking us in all the time ! "

Gordon's cheeks were crimson with mortification.

Daphne thought it was one of the most spiteful actions she had ever witnessed, but she was wise enough not to say so.

" I'm sorry to disagree, Mr. Warmsley," she said as composedly as possible. " Gordon happens to have told me the truth about his arm some time ago. He's simply out on a practice casualty run from the hospital, that's all." She turned to Monica apologetically. " I'm sorry I haven't mentioned knowing about it sooner, but I really didn't think it was necessary."

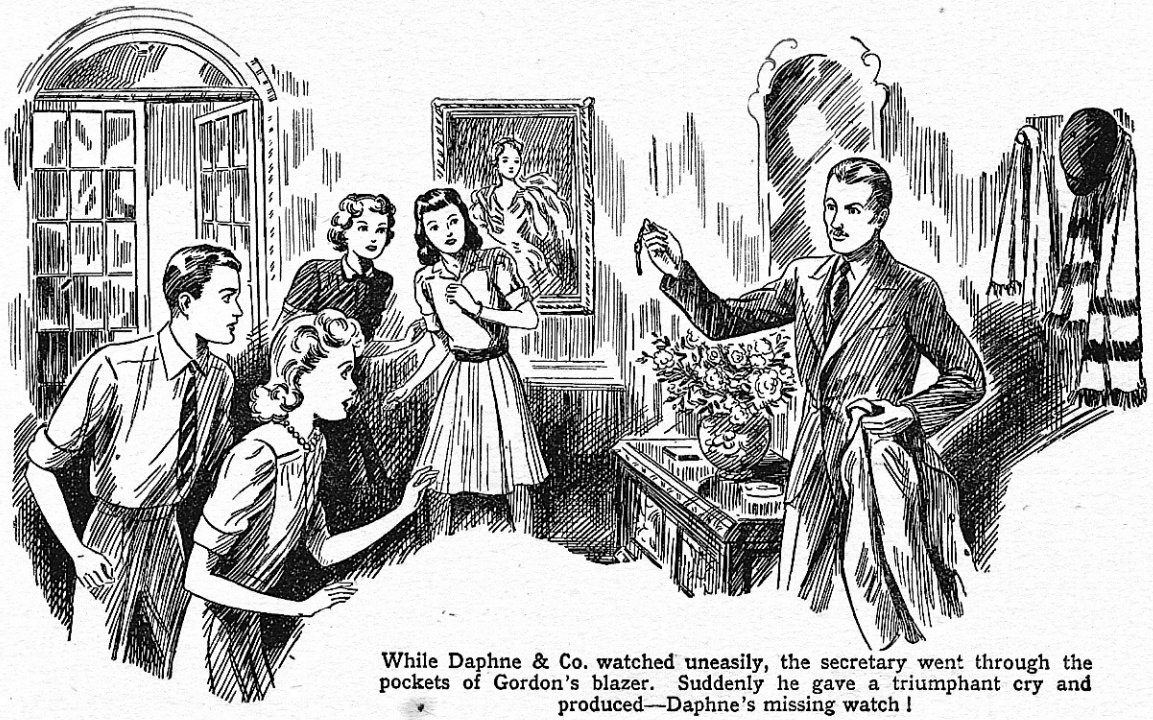
Monica, after a short, uncomfortable silence, gave a rather uncertain nod, and all eyes turned on Luke. He was no longer grinning. He gave Gordon a venomous look.

" If you've been keeping up this funny game just to dodge making yourself useful," he said throatily, " I'll soon find you a job in the kitchen. All those heavy boxes, and only girls to lift them about——"

" I'll help with pleasure ! " Gordon said at once, as he promptly slipped off his jacket and hung it on a hook. "I can see you're longing to help the girls, too, Mr. Warmsley."

Daphne nearly laughed aloud at that neat dig at the secretary, but she thought it wiser not to. Fortunately, a bell rang softly at that moment to announce that tea was served, and Monica moved in the direction of the lounge, followed by her friends.

It wasn't a very successful meal, however. There was an air of restraint of which Daphne was painfully conscious. She had puzzled them all. They were all thinking it exceedingly odd she should have known so much about Gordon and kept it to herself. And Daphne, with the thought of his confession still ringing in her mind, did not dare say anything more unless she gave too much away.



While Daphne & Co. watched uneasily, the secretary went through the pockets of Gordon's blazer. Suddenly he gave a triumphant cry and produced—Daphne's missing watch !

She believed Gordon's story, and she wanted to help him. It was his loneliness which touched her most deeply. For even his own mother, kindly "Marty" the housekeeper, doubted him. He had been very brave to return to the house so thinly disguised where Luke was so obviously his enemy. Yet what, Daphne desperately asked herself, could she do to help until she knew the whole story?

They rose from tea at last. They had just reached the hall when Monica, glancing at her wrist watch, gave a gasp of vexation.

"Stopped again! What time does your ticker say, Daphne?"

Daphne had looked at her bare wrist before she even thought.

"I—I haven't got my watch——"

"I remember—you took it off when we were hanging up the festoons!" Monica ejaculated. "It must be still on the window ledge!"

She darted into the dining hall before Daphne could stop her, and a deepening uneasiness suddenly stole over Daphne. She had meant to ask Marty if her watch had been found, but she had forgotten it in all the other excitement. Now it was too late.

A sound of footsteps reached her ears as she waited; out of the corner of her eye she was aware of Luke Warmsley and Gordon carrying a heavy box between them. Then Monica reappeared, her expression startled.

"It's gone, Daphne!" she said breathlessly. "Your ticker! If you haven't taken it yourself——"

The heavy box was dropped sharply at one end. Luke Warmsley hurried up, looking deeply concerned.

"A lost watch?" he ejaculated. "Maybe it's fallen somewhere. We certainly can't have anything lost, I'll help you look."

Everyone joined in the search, but nothing was found. Looking more anxious still, Luke Warmsley returned at last to the hall. An unaccountable foreboding caused Daphne to turn and watch him. His eyes travelled in the direction of the pegs. Suddenly he gave a cry and sprang forward. He snatched Gordon's coat from the hook where it was hanging, and his hand darted to the breast pocket. He drew something out and held it up for everyone to see.

It was a little silver watch on a black silk band.

Daphne felt sick with apprehension as she recognised—her own watch!

"In Gordon's pocket!" ejaculated Monica, in dumbfounded tones.

"But I didn't put it there!" cried Gordon Martin, his cheeks as red as fire, his voice filled with indignation.

Daphne stepped forward to take the watch from the secretary's hand. She knew the situation had taken a critical turn. If she was to think only of herself, she must be very careful what she said now. But she wasn't thinking of herself at all.

"Thank you, Mr. Warmsley," she said. "And—and I just want to say I'm quite satisfied and—and I believe Gordon. I'm perfectly certain he's not a thief!"

Luke Warmsley's jaw dropped blankly; for a second he looked astounded. Then his eyes flashed.

"That's because you haven't the advantage of knowing who he really is!" he snarled. "But I do! Gordon Martin, take off those spectacles! I know you! You're the boy who got away from here last Christmas only because they were too soft-hearted to prosecute you. But we all know you took the jewelled painting that vanished on Christmas Eve! You passed it to a confederate——"

"It's a lie," Gordon interrupted thickly, "and you know it! Nothing was proved against me for a jolly good reason! I was innocent! There was only your word against mine! And you know that, because there was no evidence——"

"Evidence!" Luke Warmsley interrupted harshly. "That's right—there was no evidence then. But you're not as clever as you were! You've slipped up this time, and you won't get away so easily as you did before. You'll stay here now, whether you like it or not—until the police come!"

Daphne's cheeks were ashen. She was almost beside herself with horror.

"The police!" she gasped. "Mr.

Warmsley, you can't do that! I won't accuse Gordon! I refuse——"

But the man's hands were tightly on Gordon's shoulders. He turned unheeding. Daphne was moving after him, when Monica abruptly grabbed her wrist.

"Don't be so silly, Daphne!" she hissed in her ear.

Daphne spun round. Her heart almost failed her. For Monica's face was stern, her eyes were hard and angry.

"I tell you, Monica——" Daphne desperately pleaded.

"You've gone far enough—almost too far, Daphne!" Monica angrily cut her short. "You ought to have a little common sense left. The boy got into the house by a trick. He's been proved to be an impostor. Now it comes out he's been stealing here before."

"But it's my watch!" Daphne pleaded.

"It's our house, Daphne!" Monica retorted. "And you're here as a guest. I don't want to say something I'll be sorry for later on. But if you can't behave as we expect a guest to behave——"

She did not finish her sentence.

If Daphne couldn't behave—if she couldn't accept the evidence against the friendless boy—there would be no welcome for her here at the Christmas festivities, after all!

She would be asked to leave!

CHAPTER III

A YEAR-OLD SECRET

DAPHNE was in her room, that pretty little room which had so enchanted her when she arrived only a few hours ago, desperately struggling with her thoughts. She had such a tremendous decision to make, and such a little time to think.

For, if she still wanted to remain here as a welcome guest, she must disown Gordon and leave him to his fate, apologise to Monica for her outburst downstairs—forget the very existence of that boy who had assured her he wanted to give his mother the most wonderful Christmas present in the world.

Could she do it—even to have the Christmas of her life?

Only one thought consoled her. Gordon had, for the moment, turned the tables on his foe by escaping from him and getting away. They had searched the whole house in vain. When the police arrived the suspect would still be missing.

But for how long, Daphne wondered. Without even possessing his jacket, Gordon couldn't get far in the blizzard raging outside.

The thought took her to the window, and she stared through the flurrying swirls to the whiteness below. It would be a terrible night for anyone wandering through that waste, hunted and unprotected.

Her thoughts were abruptly arrested, for there had been a momentary lull when the whirl of white ceased, and she could see the ground clearly. And the light, falling on the ground at an angle, still showed her traces of almost obliterated footprints leading from a side door of the house to a barn-like building a few yards away!

In an instant Daphne guessed what it meant; in that same instant she made up her mind. If she could only see Gordon again for a few moments she might be able to come to a compromise which would solve her dreadful dilemma. She could then pretend to disown him if, in secret, there was a chance she could still be working for him.

Softly she left her room; eagerly she sped downstairs. And there in the hall, his sallow features lit only by the leaping firelight, she came face to face with Luke Warmsley.

"I hoped to see you, Miss Daphne," he said, in an unexpectedly friendly voice. "There are such a lot of things I'd like to explain. You probably think I'm hard, but that's because you don't know Gordon like I do. You're not the first to be taken in by his charming manner."

"Really?" said Daphne coldly.

Luke nodded emphatically.

"Those decorations he tore down, for instance—I know about your kindly act in putting them up again, because I happened to pass the room and looked in while you were helping Gordon. But he so often does that sort of thing—has wild, mad impulses you'd never credit unless

you'd seen what I've seen of him. I thought you ought to know."

Daphne stared after him in amazement as he glided away. Despite her anxious thoughts she was deeply puzzled. The man had lied. She knew he had not seen Gordon helping her, for the good reason that she had put the damage right alone!

What did it mean? Why had he been so anxious to make her believe Gordon was irresponsible in such a small way when the charge of theft hanging over his head was so much greater?

But she forgot even Luke as she reached the side door, listened for a few moments to make sure nobody was about, then opened the door and stepped out into the night.

The wind was blowing cruelly, and a deluge of snow was falling. She had to brace herself resolutely and almost fight her way to the outbuilding. Reaching it, she threw open the door, closed it behind her, and paused for a few moments gasping for breath. Then she called softly:

"Gordon, it's me—Daphne!"

There was a stir almost at once at the end of the dark barn. A figure came vaguely towards her. She could only just discern his features as, an old sack round his shoulders for warmth, he stood close to the cobwebby window.

"I'm sorry I ever told you anything, Miss Daphne," Gordon confessed, miserably. "I ought to have realised that only a fool would come back with Luke Warmsley still about the place. I want you to forget you've ever seen me!"

"I can't do that now, Gordon," answered Daphne, simply. "Maybe I'm a fool as well, and that's why we've something in common. I want the whole story now. What was this jewelled painting they accused you of stealing? How did it vanish?"

She soon had the story from him. The painting, a dainty miniature in a jewelled frame, had always hung in the dining hall. Last Christmas Eve Gordon had been alone in the room, preparing it for the next day's party. He remembered seeing the painting in its usual position just before his work took him to a far end of the room. He had been stooping to polish a radiator when he had vaguely heard sounds, but thought nothing of them. When he returned to the centre of the room, the picture had simply—vanished!

Gordon, of course, had instantly raised an alarm. Then the mystery had deepened enormously. There was clear evidence that nobody else had entered the room by the doorway, for other people had been working outside it all the time. The windows, still tightly shut, could only be opened from the inside.

Gordon's employer had leapt to what seemed, to him, the only possible explanation. Gordon, he decided, had handed the picture through one of the windows to a confederate outside, who had made a clear getaway, leaving no trace behind. Unable actually to prove Gordon's guilt, his employer had discharged him in the deepest disgrace.

"There's something very queer about that dining hall!" Gordon concluded. "And, somehow, I felt sure I had a clue to-day when I saw the broken decorations—but I say!" His expression changed, and he looked at Daphne anxiously. "You're simply shivering with the cold. You can't stay here in this awful place. Don't worry about me! I'm warm enough hidden in the old sacks, and I'll get away when the wind drops. There'll be another day—don't worry about that. Or about me, either! I've caused enough trouble as it is—I'll never forgive myself if I know I've spoilt your Christmas, too. Promise me you'll go straight back to the house and—forget I ever existed!"

Daphne knew she must return, or her absence might be noticed. She left the barn and ran back to the side door. She opened it, entered, and closed the door behind her. And there she stopped in consternation as she beheld—Monica Tressidy waiting for her!

Monica's brow was like thunder.

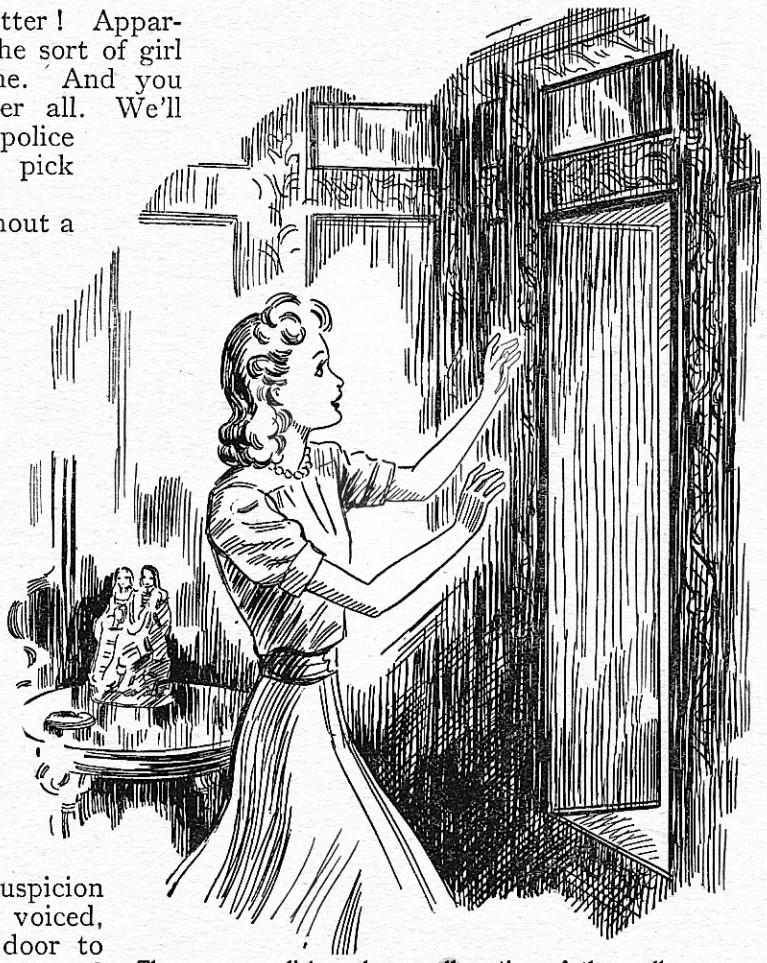
"So that's where Gordon is—in the old barn!" she accused Daphne. "You've been out to him! In spite of what I said to you, and I meant to be kind, too—

well, perhaps it doesn't matter! Apparently I just didn't realise the sort of girl you are until now, Daphne. And you really have helped us after all. We'll know just where to send the police now when they come to pick Gordon up!"

Daphne turned away without a word. All was over! It was the end of Christmas, of course. When the police car came she would have to ask for a lift in it as well, just as far as the station. From there, on a train crawling dolefully through the blizzard, she would make her way back to school. She was clear enough about that. There was nothing else for her to do now.

But she did not return to her room. She was just passing the dining hall, when she paused abruptly. A faint scraping sound had just come from within. It sounded like someone moving furtively about inside.

Fired by the strange suspicion Gordon had so recently voiced, Daphne softly opened the door to see who it was. Blankly she stood on the threshold as the whole room was exposed to view.



There was a click and a small section of the wall swung open. "A secret door!" Daphne exclaimed excitedly. Where would this discovery lead her?

The light shining in through the long windows was still sufficient to show her that the room was quite empty!

Daphne crept in and closed the door behind her. Even as she did so there was a sudden gleam of lights outside. A car came crunching purposefully through the snow and stopped with a swish at the main entrance. It did not need the ominous tread of heavy boots to tell her the truth. The police had arrived. To take Gordon away!

Thanks to her own well-meant but clumsy effort to help him, they would now know where to look for him immediately!

She had never felt so desperate in her life, for she knew that only a matter of minutes remained for her to act.

In a flash Daphne found herself standing just at the very spot where she had surprised Gordon a few hours earlier, one of the torn decorations still in his hand.

As she heard the front door open, and the tread of heavy feet across the hall, she thought at lightning speed.

The decorations attached to the wall had been cleanly snapped. Gordon hadn't done that, she was sure. But a few minutes ago Luke Warmsley had greatly puzzled her by trying to convince her that Gordon loved doing that sort of thing!

Why had he been so anxious for her to believe that?

The steps of the police passed outside the door of the room ; the officers were being led straight to Gordon's hide-out.

Daphne wouldn't even listen now. A startling suspicion was dawning in her mind as she stared at the panelled wall.

Perhaps Luke had feared that if she didn't believe in Gordon's guilt she would come to some more significant conclusion about the broken festoons !

Panelled walls had been known before now to hold strange secrets of their own.

If a secret, unsuspected doorway had opened after festoons had been unwittingly attached to it, that would instantly explain the mystery !

Daphne nearly danced with her excitement. She was sure she had got the explanation at last—and she had a clue, as well. The broken festoons should tell her exactly where to look for that doorway !

From outside the house came one startled, protesting cry. Daphne knew it was Gordon's. He was already in custody. But it did not stop her now. Frantically her fingers were running up and down the panelling. There must be something to move the door, of course—some secret spring.

Suddenly an electric thrill ran through her. She had found a tiny projection which moved. She pressed on it as hard as she could. Soundlessly a portion of the panelling, like a tall, narrow door, began to swing away from her. She heard the snapping of a festoon as one broke just over her head.

At the self-same moment steps came along the passage outside—the heavy steps of the police now leading their unwilling captive with them.

Daphne darted into the narrow cell-like place beyond the door. It was lit, for a gleaming electric torch lay on the ground. And the light of that torch showed—a pair of dangling feet as a man who had been in the room now tried frantically to crawl up a chimney-like aperture in the thickness of the side wall.

" Help, help ! " yelled Daphne, at the top of her voice, as she rushed in, grasped the thrashing feet, and hung on to them for dear life. " Help, help ! "

She was still clinging to them when the police came racing in. She held on grimly until the police took those feet from her, and dragged the owner down. And there on the floor, dazed and confused, with a jewelled miniature painting still buttoned inside his jacket, sat—Luke Warmsley !

. . . . .

Caught so completely, Luke later confessed all. He had known of the secret recess behind the panelling for years. He had planned to steal the jewelled miniature under circumstances in which someone else would be blamed, and Gordon had become his luckless victim. Luke had kept it, ever since, safely hidden only a few feet from the spot from which it had been stolen, knowing he must wait until the theft was forgotten before he could safely offer it for sale. It was his mistake in descending by the chimney that afternoon, and emerging from the secret room, after the festoons had been fixed in position, which had made him so fearful that his secret would be discovered. It was that very fear which had led to his undoing in the end.

Gordon, of course, was cleared completely by the confession—and so was Daphne. And her joy was complete when she heard the unanimous demand of her proud, exulting chums that the hospital must give Gordon the necessary time off so that he could spend Christmas with them as well.

And what a Christmas it was—with " Marty " smiling as she hadn't smiled for a whole long year. And truly Marty had reason enough when she reflected how her son, with Daphne's loyal assistance, had given her all he had set out to achieve —the finest Christmas present she could possibly wish for !

Printed in England and Published by The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, England. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd. This book may only be exported to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa by the appointed Sole Agent.

That *chocolaty* taste

It's good to see the youngsters getting their Cadbury chocolate ration — small as many no doubt think it. Here's a useful hint to mothers. When the chocolate ration is finished, the children can get that chocolaty flavour they like so much as a *drink* — in Bournville Cocoa. A very warming, beneficial drink too and, like solid chocolate, a food. After all, chocolate and cocoa come from the same bean.

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